



DOWN THE CAMB, SPINTERING INTO TEN THOUSAND
PIECES

Franklin

The Forbidden Land

BY

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With frontispiece by John de Walton

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THE FORBIDDEN LAND

CHAPTER I

The Shadow of Tibet

"I say, here's another chap disappeared in Tibet. Explorer named Stamford Jones. Went in six months ago with a party of Nepalese porters, and not a word has been heard from him since."

Colin Grant looked up from the morning paper he was reading and across the breakfast-table at his brother Dick. He was a tall good-looking boy of nineteen, remarkably strong and athletic for his age, while Dick resembled him in all respects except that he was fair where Colin was dark, and a year younger.

Dick nodded.

"I know," he answered. "Looks as though Tibet is becoming a real mystery country again. First the Ross-Wilkinson Everest Expedition disappears; then——"

"But the Ross-Wilkinson lot were swept away by an avalanche. That was proved."

"Was it? I'll tell you something, Colin. Uncle John doesn't think so. He says it's almost impossible for an entire expedition of that size to be swept away by a single avalanche, and he should know."

The Forbidden Land

"He says that, does he? Then if it wasn't an avalanche it must have been something much more nasty, and certainly all these other disappearances do look fishy. Scott-Howard, who went to see if he could find any survivors of the Ross-Wilkinson crowd, is still missing, and now this chap Stamford Jones has disappeared. And they may not be all. There may be others whose names have never been published. "Hullo, Larg," as a Gurkha, small like his race but whose broad shoulders denoted great strength, entered the room, "where's the Uncle Sahib this morning? Time he was down."

"The Uncle Sahib is about to arrive," replied the little man, beaming all over his face. "He slept late, and Larg did not wake his Sahib. Sleep is precious, and presently there may not be much time to sleep."

"Hullo! What do you mean by that, Larg?" asked Dick, looking up. "Why should sleep be scarce?"

The little Gurkha grinned.

"I do not know, Sahib Dick, but I feel it. My Sahib is a great explorer, and an explorer is like an eagle, never can he rest for long. Also, yesterday, I saw the Sahib looking at his guns."

"You did, did you? Well, if he's off again I hope he takes us with him. Know anything about this, Colin?"

The elder boy shook his head, and at that moment a tall handsome man, lean and brown, entered the room. John Hanson at forty-five was still in the pink of condition, and he was the boys' guardian, though his guardianship had been a somewhat sketchy affair owing to the fact that he was a great traveller, and the foremost living white authority on Tibet and little-known Asia.

"Morning, Uncle," Colin greeted him. "What's

this Larg has been telling us? He says you've been looking at your guns. 'Sounds fishy to me.'

The elder man smiled as he helped himself to kidneys and bacon.

"Fishy!" He raised his eyebrows. "Why fishy? I can assure you, Colin, fish are the last things I have in mind."

Colin laughed.

"I guess they are, Uncle, but if it's bigger game you're after the members of this meeting wish it to be known that they desire to share in the said hunting, and that any attempt to leave them out in the cold will receive their severe censure."

"Motion carried unanimously," confirmed Dick.

John Hanson smiled.

"I understand. Regular stand and deliver. Well, all I can say, Nephews, is that the motion shall receive serious consideration should the occasion arise. Anything in the paper this morning?"

"Yes," replied Colin, watching his uncle closely. "Stamford Jones is in the paper. Nothing has been heard of him for six months."

"Stamford Jones!"

"Yes, Uncle, Stamford Jones. His makes the third published disappearance in Tibet during the last nine months. What Dick and I are wondering is, how many other men are missing whose names have never appeared in print."

"Stamford Jones, so that's the reason." A worried expression had come over John Hanson's bronzed face, and he seemed to be speaking to himself. Then he pulled himself together. "Other men, Colin," he repeated. "So you've smelt a rat, too. All right, boys, you shall come in if there's anything doing. Indeed, you may be useful. No, no more now. I'm only going

on supposition myself. Be in the study at eight to-night, and you shall hear everything. What's the programme to-day? More flying?"

Colin nodded. Both boys were already qualified airmen, and their ambition was to obtain posts as pilots in one of the great passenger-flying companies, but that day their thoughts were elsewhere than on their job. Flying was great, but an expedition into Asia, which was what Uncle John's words seemed to portend, would be infinitely more exciting, and they impatiently awaited the evening. Eight o'clock to the stroke found them in the study. It was a large comfortable room with a view over Hampstead Heath, and the wall space that was not lined with books was covered with trophies of the chase and marvellous photographs of little-known lands.

Their uncle looked up as they entered.

"Keen, eh?" he remarked. "Well, that's good. If this evening develops as I expect, we'll need all our keenness before long. There he is," as the front-door bell rang. "Boys, our visitor is Mr. Staunton Travers, permanent official of the India Office. You don't see his name in the papers, and he doesn't make speeches, but he's the power behind the scenes, and I advise you to listen closely to what he says."

A minute later Colin and Dick were being introduced to a thin little man whose appearance was relieved from mediocrity by an immense head and a pair of keen eyes behind large spectacles.

"My nephews, Mr. Travers," said the boys' uncle, making the introduction. "They are both of them qualified air-pilots, and I suggest their presence at this conference because, if the proposal you are going to make is what I think it is, they may prove very helpful in its execution."

"They are rather young, are they not?" replied the little official doubtfully.

"Young but not inexperienced," replied the explorer with a smile. "Besides being efficient air-pilots, they can both speak Tibetan and two other eastern languages taught them by myself and my servant Larg, and I have taught them to shoot. Further, I can vouch for their silence, and anything mentioned in this room will not be repeated."

At the final words the small man's face broke into a pleasant smile.

"Good enough for me," he answered. "For the rest, if John Hanson doesn't know how to choose his helpers no one does." He took the seat offered him but refused to smoke. "Well, Mr. Hanson, from your preparations and your remarks I gather you know what has brought me here?"

John Hanson nodded.

"Stamford Jones," he replied.

"Exactly, Stamford Jones. I presume you read about the poor fellow's disappearance in the papers?"

"My nephew, Colin, mentioned it to me first. He also made a rather pertinent remark. He said that there had been three published disappearances in Tibet within the last nine months, and that he and his brother were wondering how many other men had disappeared whose names had never got into the papers."

"He said that, did he?" exclaimed the official, looking at Colin through his big glasses. "And what, my young friend, caused you to make such a remark?"

"Well, sir, it's rather obvious. A big expedition like the Ross-Wilkinson Everest Expedition doesn't disappear without suspicion——"

"Come, come," interposed Mr. Travers quickly.

"The Ross-Wilkinson Expedition was swept away by an avalanche; everybody believes that."

"Do they? Do you, sir? The papers said so, but my brother," nodding towards Dick, "said that such a large expedition could not be totally wiped out by a single avalanche; yet we have heard of no survivors. Then Scott-Howard, who went to search for survivors, disappeared, and now Stamford Jones has vanished. All these disappearances cannot be accidental; that would be too great a coincidence. And as the Government of India must be perfectly well aware of the fact, it is almost certain that other men, secret service men, perhaps, have been sent into Tibet to discover what is going on there, and to try to learn something of the vanished explorers. These are the men my brother and I mean, and we wonder how many of them have disappeared."

The India Office official took off his glasses and wiped them before he replied.

"A masterly diagnosis plainly put," he remarked at last, "and I will reply as clearly. Six other men have been sent into Tibet, and six have not returned."

A long silence followed this brief statement, and to the boys, sitting watching the two elder men, it seemed as though a shadow had entered the room, a sinister shapeless shadow which stretched from that quiet room in Hampstead right across the world to the frozen uplands of Tibet. Colin felt it, and Dick, and so did their uncle, as his next words showed.

"I don't like it," he said suddenly. "There's something happening in Tibet, something being prepared, perhaps, the secret of which was endangered by those men who have disappeared; but what is it?"

"We don't know," replied Mr. Travers grimly; "but we have got to find out!"

Again he polished his glasses, but when he spoke his voice was crisp and clear.

“It is like this, Mr. Hanson. The Government of India and the Home Government are much disturbed at these disappearances, and, like you, they have reached the conclusion that something, in all probability something inimical to India, is being secretly prepared in Tibet. Naturally they want to know what it is, and when six of the cleverest men in the Indian secret service disappear without a trace this desire is increased to anxiety. I'll tell you another thing. No one enters India from Tibet these days. Twelve months ago the frontier was closed in a night, not openly by armed guards, you must understand, but all at once the flow of travellers ceased. It was as though Tibet had suddenly become an uninhabited land from which no travellers came because there were none to come. Do I make myself clear?”

“Admirably,” the boys' uncle replied. “And who do you think is behind all this?”

“Mongolia. Mongolia, as you know, aims at supremacy in Asia, and that supremacy can never be hers while India remains a friend of the British people. Mongolia wants India, and personally, fantastic as it may seem, I believe that Mongolia is preparing in Tibet for a vast invasion of India which will make her master of that country.”

“Impossible!”

“Exactly. The nature of the country in between, the almost impassable mountain ranges, makes such a suggestion sound absurd; yet how else explain what has happened? Had Tibet suddenly become a closed country again, she would have turned back the men we sent, not killed or imprisoned them all, and entry from Tibet into India would still be permitted. Scoff

as you will, Mr. Hanson, but I see no other explanation."

The boys' uncle rose to his feet, and walked to and fro across the room several times before he suddenly turned and faced the official.

"Well," he asked almost fiercely; "what do you want me to do? Out with it, man!"

Mr. Travers smiled, in no way perturbed.

"We want you," he replied slowly, "to go to Tibet and discover what is happening there. I know," raising a hand as John Hanson seemed about to interrupt, "that we may be sending you to your death, but you are our last hope, Mr. Hanson. You know more about Tibet than any other white man living; you have friends among the lamas, you are a master of disguise, and you, if any man can, will solve the riddle. Don't reply at once. Think it over. You——"

"Think! Staunton Travers, I don't want to think. I knew this was coming, but, man, it's mad! No army could possibly invade India through those mountains. By air perhaps, but even that would be terribly risky. India is too big to be conquered by air alone, and, besides, our own air force is no longer negligible. No, Travers, it's a mad idea. A modern army with its tanks and guns could never negotiate those passes, protected as they would be, and once you decide that an army cannot get into India through the mountains your whole premise falls to the ground."

"Not necessarily, Uncle." All eyes turned to Dick, who was speaking for the first time. "Perhaps they don't intend to invade India through the mountains; perhaps the way the Mongolians will come is under the mountains."

"Under the mountains!"

Mr. Staunton Travers repeated the words in a dazed,

incredulous voice, while Mr. Hanson and Colin stared at Dick as though they doubted his sanity.

"Under the mountains!" This time the boys' uncle spoke. "This is not a fairy tale, Dick. What the blazes makes you talk such rot?"

"I'm not sure that it is rot," replied Dick calmly. "I was thinking of Maulanium and Professor Ramsay's tunnelling machine. If all he claimed for it was true, what I suggest would not be impossible."

John Hanson sat down abruptly, and passed a bronzed hand across his forehead.

"Maulanium! Tunnelling machine! What are you talking about?" inquired Mr. Travers plaintively.

The boys' uncle sat up with a jerk.

"I'll tell you," he snapped; "and, by Jove! now that I think of it, young Dick may not be so far out after all. Maulanium! The tunnelling machine! Heavens! if it's true, what are we in for?"

"If you would explain yourself I might make a suggestion," remarked the little man quietly.

John Hanson laughed.

"Right you are. Here goes, this is the story. I had a friend, a Professor Charles Ramsay, an inventor and a very clever man. He was a good deal older than I, and I still think a bit of a crank, for towards the end of his life he became obsessed by the traffic problem of London, and the way the English countryside was being spoilt by the great arterial roads. You are wondering, Travers, what the London traffic problem has to do with the other problem before us, but I am coming to that. To cut a long story short, Ramsay invented a new metal which he called Maulanium, and which, to quote his own words, was ten times stronger than the strongest steel, and ten times harder than the hardest diamond. Also he invented a tunnel-

ling machine which was to be made of this metal, and which, he claimed, would cut through the hardest rock like paper, and would within a few years provide not only London but the whole of England with a complete system of underground roads, and so solve the traffic problem for good. Those were Charles Ramsay's inventions, and the purpose to which he proposed to dedicate them. I looked upon them as the fantasies of a dreamer, but whether I was right or not was never proved, for before he could complete his invention Ramsay died, leaving me two envelopes, one of which contained the formula for the production of Maulanium and the other the blue prints of the tunnelling machine.

"That was two years ago, Travers. Six months later this house was broken into one night. Silver was taken, some odd money, and those two envelopes. An odd combination, and now I realize that the silver and money were perhaps taken as a blind, but at the time, having claimed the insurance, I forgot all about the matter, and I don't believe I've given poor Ramsay's inventions another thought until to-night."

"Your nephew seems to have done so," replied Mr. Travers, looking at Dick. "What made you connect Professor Ramsay's invention with our present problem, may I ask?"

Dick grinned.

"Well, I suppose I've been thinking about it for some time," he answered. "Not about Tibet, you know, but about the uses to which such a tunnelling machine could be put. Take the Germans. Suppose they had pinched the plans, and Maulanium and the machine had proved to be all that the Professor claimed for them. The French frontier would have ceased to function in a day, for with half a dozen Ramsay

tunnelling machines at work the Germans could have tunnelled as many roads right underneath, and come up within a few miles of Paris without anyone being the wiser."

"I see, and what the Germans might have done in France you think the Mongolians may be doing in Tibet?"

"Yes. A machine which tunnels through rock as though it were paper might be useful even in Tibet."

"I agree." Mr. Travers rose to his feet. "Well, Mr. Hanson, this discussion has taken a strange turn. A machine which could tunnel through the mountain barriers into India sounds impossible; yet your nephew has raised an interesting question, the answer to which can only be found in Tibet. Perhaps you will let me know within a day or two if you are willing to go in search of that answer."

The boys' uncle grasped the outstretched hand.

"I don't need a day or two to consider the matter, Mr. Travers. I can give you my answer now. It is, yes, and as I think the best way will be to enter Tibet from the north by air my nephews shall accompany me as pilots."

"I am sincerely glad to hear your decision," replied the little man. "The thought of something brewing in Tibet has been on my nerves of late, and since your nephew's revelation it has seemed to me—fancy, no doubt—but it has seemed to me that the shadow of Tibet has grown darker."

CHAPTER II

A Blow in the Dark

Once having come to a decision, John Hanson was a man used to depart at a moment's notice, but on this occasion such speed was not possible. There was the outfit to be purchased, rifles and pistols to be bought for Colin and Dick, and, above all, an aeroplane to be acquired. On this subject the boys' uncle asked the advice of his nephews, and after a great deal of discussion and consultation with numerous experts, a powerful twin-engined Albatross machine was chosen. The aeroplane had cabin accommodation for four persons, with ample luggage space, a cruising speed of 200 miles an hour, and, most important of all, she carried a fuel supply for 1600 miles non-stop flight which, as the boys' uncle remarked, ought to meet all eventualities.

"She's a beauty," agreed Colin, when, at the end of a long trial flight in which both boys had piloted her, he pushed forward the control stick and brought the Albatross to a successful landing in Heston Aerodrome. "Where shall we start from? Here, Uncle?"

The elder man shook his head.

"Too public, Colin," he replied. "If there's anything in Dick's idea that some emissaries of Mongolia pinched Ramsay's plans, then it's quite on the cards that we are being watched, and for John Hanson and his nephews to start off openly for the East might raise unwelcome speculations. No, if you boys are

satisfied with the machine, this is the last we see of her until the day we start, and that will be from some quiet field in Hampshire. I've already arranged with the authorities to fly her down, and when the time comes we shall follow by car. If we leave home late one night and take care that we are not followed, we shall stand a good chance of fading quietly out of the picture without anyone realizing we have gone."

"Sounds a good idea, Uncle," commented Dick. "You know, I've half an idea that we are being watched. When our rifles and ammunition were being delivered the other day there was a ragged-looking chap lounging around and taking quite a lot of interest in the business. So I went out to have a closer look at him, but when he saw me coming he dodged behind the van and made off. Looked very fishy to me."

"Maybe," replied the elder man, "though the odds are he was just an ordinary out-of-work. Still, there's the probability, as I have said, and if the Mongolians got on to the fact that Staunton Travers called on me the other evening they may have smelt a rat. I'll tell Larg to keep his eyes open. If there's any spying being done, he'll soon spot it."

Larg, however, could discover nothing to report. No one appeared to be taking any undue interest in the house at Hampstead, and the final preparations proceeded without a hitch, so that a week after Colin and Dick had flown the Albatross everything was ready for a start.

"Is all the luggage in the car?" asked the boys' uncle as the three of them sat at dinner on the evening before the start.

"Everything, Uncle," replied Colin. He and Dick were feeling so excited at the prospect of the great adventure before them that they found difficulty in

eating their food. "All we have to do is to get in and drive off."

"Good! One advantage of being an irresponsible wanderer such as I is that the servants take no notice of anything I do. 'I told Brown and his wife yesterday that we should be leaving this evening for an indefinite period, and he just asked me if he was to carry on as usual, and that was that.'" The speaker looked at his watch. "Eight o'clock. Three more hours, Nephews, before we start to disappear. Well, it looks as though we are going to be successful in our vanishing trick." He lifted his glass. "Here's to our success. May we lift the shadow of Tibet, and confound all those who would break the *Pax Britannica*."

Colin and Dick raised their glasses and drank solemnly, and so intent were all three upon the toast that they none of them noticed a round flat face with narrow slanting eyes which for one moment peered fixedly in through the uncurtained window, and then was gone. Even Larg did not detect the intruder, for he was in the garage mounting guard over the car and its precious contents, so that the owner of the face came and went and was presently running down the dark street with a swift pattering of feet, without anyone being the wiser.

Three hours later a long dark saloon car slid out of the gate of the Hampstead house and turned southwest. Colin was at the wheel, and by him sat Larg, while in the back were Dick and the boys' uncle and the travellers' luggage. There was surprisingly little of this, for as John Hanson had pointed out, once they were in Tibet and had abandoned the 'plane, they could take nothing but what they could carry on their backs, and by far the heaviest parts of their equipment were the rifles and pistols and belts of

ammunition upon which they would have to depend both for protection and food. Colin swung the car out of the quiet road into a broader thoroughfare and pressed down the accelerator. The great highway was almost empty at that time of night, and the powerful headlamps lit up the hard smooth surface, putting to shame the pale light from the stars in the April sky above. Soon the houses were left behind, and Colin opened the throttle wider and wider until the great car was eating up its mile of road every minute. Like a meteor she flashed through the countryside, slowing down as she came to slumbering hamlets; then roaring on again between the woods and hedges and sleeping fields, while all the time the gaunt telegraph-posts flashed by like a never-ending regiment of soldiers. What would have happened before they travelled that way again? Colin wondered. He slowed down and swung round a bend; then trod on the accelerator until once again the needle of the speedometer flickered round the sixty mark, and with every mile that dropped behind them Colin's spirits rose higher and higher, and civilization seemed to fall farther and farther in the rear. This was better than piloting the greatest passenger aeroplane that ever flew. This was adventure, real adventure at last.

"We're being followed."

The travellers were an hour out of London. For a while no one had spoken, and now Dick's words broke the silence with startling suddenness.

"Followed!"

The boys' uncle swung round in his seat and gazed out of the rear window, while for the first time Colin became aware of a pair of dimmed headlights reflected in the driving mirror and evidently belonging to a car about two hundred yards behind.

"Yes," replied Dick. "That car's been hanging on to us for the last fifteen miles. I've been watching her. Whoever is driving keeps exactly the same distance behind, no matter what we do. If we slow down he slows, if we go faster he accelerates."

"What is she? Can you see?" asked Colin.

"Not very well. Looks like a big saloon to me. Anyway, she's fast, whatever she is."

"Well, we'll see if she's fast enough. What about it, Uncle? Shall I let her out?"

"By all means, Nephew. Short of putting us into the ditch, let her out as much as you like. It almost seems that we did not escape unnoticed after all."

Colin needed no further bidding. The road stretched straight ahead for some considerable distance, and now he opened the throttle until the great car was hurtling along the highway at over seventy miles an hour. But still the car behind hung doggedly on to their tail, and after a few minutes the elder man called out to the boy to slacken speed.

"We'll gain nothing by breaking our necks, Colin, and evidently the car behind is not to be shaken off that way. Slow up and let's see if the driver will pass us. Perhaps we're mistaken, and he's not following us after all."

Accordingly Colin slowed down until they were travelling at a mere thirty miles an hour. For a moment or two it seemed as though the driver of the car behind was going to follow suit; then suddenly, with a roar, the pursuer gathered speed and came rushing towards them. What followed was all over in a few seconds. At the time the road was passing between two belts of dark woodland, and suddenly Colin was aware of the pursuing car travelling alongside their own, and of the faces of four men glimmering palely white in the

reflected glow of his headlights. Then Colin caught sight of a hand resting on the open window-frame of the other car, a huge white hand on the third finger of which shone a great golden ring. The next moment the hand moved and something long and thin was thrust out of the window and pointed at their car.

Colin saw it and yelled a warning; the next instant several things happened at once. Colin braked—that was one thing. Next he ducked; then from the other car came twin stabs of fire accompanied instantly by a harsh outburst of sound and the tearing, rending crash of bullets through glass and woodwork. For a moment it seemed to rain broken glass. Colin was conscious of a sharp prick on his right cheek, of something which seemed to fan through his hair, of a smothered exclamation of pain from the seat behind, and then suddenly a bullet struck the steering-wheel, shattering it and jerking it out of his hands, and a second later, with a crash and a bump, the car struck a telegraph-post, bounced off, and finally subsided slowly into a ditch by the roadside. In the same instant there came two final bursts of fire from the attackers, followed by the roar of the exhaust as their car gathered speed and disappeared into the night.

“Anyone hurt?”

Colin reached up, switched on the lamp in the roof, and then pulled himself round as well as the sloping position of the car would allow, and gazed anxiously at the seat behind. Dick was on the floor, but as he was already struggling into a sitting position Colin concluded he was not hurt, and from his brother he turned to look at his uncle. The elder man was leaning back in his corner clutching his left shoulder with his right hand, and at sight of the blood welling out between his fingers Colin uttered a cry of dismay.

At the sound, his uncle looked up and smiled grimly.

"Nothing to be nervous about, Nephew," he said harshly. "Bullet in the shoulder, that's all. Larg'll soon patch me up. But what's wrong with your cheek? You seem to have stopped something."

Colin raised a hand to his cheek, and brought it away damp with blood and with a splinter of glass between his fingers.

"Bit of glass," he replied. "I remember now, I felt a prick when those blighters were firing at us. I say, Uncle, someone's after our blood—there's no doubt about that. Whatever are we going to do now?"

"Proceed on our journey, of course, as soon as we're patched up. It's a pity the cat's out of the bag, but we can't help that, and anyway there are some bunglers among our enemies or we'd have been dead by this time. Larg, help me out of the car; then get out the first-aid box and tie up this shoulder. Colin, shove a bit of plaster on that cheek of yours, and after that, you and Dick might have a look at the map and find out where we are. We want a doctor and a fresh car; those are our two most urgent needs and the sooner we get them the better."

It was Dick, however, who fixed their position while Larg was attending to the wounded.

"Looks to me as though we're about four miles from Basingstoke," he announced after he had pored over the map for some minutes by the aid of a pocket torch. "What about it, Uncle? Shall I toddle off and fetch help? I'll knock up a garage and a doctor and be back here under an hour and a half."

"All right, Dick. You're the only whole white member of the party, so I guess it's up to you. Hurry, and tell the garage man——"

"Wait a bit, Uncle." The interruption came from

Colin who, as soon as his cut cheek had been attended to, had seated himself on the running-board of the wrecked car, and remained there lost in thought. "Listen to me a minute. I've got a better plan than that."

The boy paused a moment as though to marshal his thoughts; then went on:

"I suppose we're lucky not to be dead. I mean, if those chaps had used their sub-machine guns properly we should be dead."

"No doubt about it, Colin. Seeing the state of that car we should, by rights, all be laid out by the side of the road with never another thought of this world. As it is, all we've collected is a cut cheek and a wounded shoulder. Yes, we've been lucky, all right."

"But those men don't know that we've been lucky," persisted Colin. "Quite likely they think we really are dead."

"More than likely, I should say," replied the boy's uncle; "and it's going to be a nasty shock for some of them when they find that we are very much alive."

"Just so," replied Colin. "It'll be a shock for them, but immediately they've recovered from the shock they'll set about devising means to repair the damage, and you bet they won't bungle things a second time. So that's why I say, let's stop as we are and remain dead."

"Remain dead!" John Hanson and Dick exclaimed in unison. "Remain dead! Whatever do you mean?"

"Just what I say, remain dead. Listen, you two; this is my idea. Instead of Dick rousing up a doctor and a garage man, let him go to the hospital, there's sure to be one in Basingstoke, and get them to send out an ambulance and stretchers to take us in. He'll have to do a bit of explaining, but if he says we're on

Government service that ought to suffice for the time being, and once you're in the hospital you can get on the 'phone to Staunton Travers and he'll soon fix things up."

"H'm! Well, yes, I daresay he could. Go on, Nephew, I'm getting interested."

Colin laughed.

"Oh! it's really quite simple. The hospital staff, those who know about us, will have to be sworn to secrecy, and if necessary Travers will have to arrange for four mock funerals. Then the Albatross will have to wait for the time being, and instead of flying we'll have to start the journey by boat. Get the idea? After the announcement of our deaths, and when our enemies are off their guard, we'll all four sneak out of the hospital one night and journey to Southampton, where we'll go on board the ship on which Travers will already have booked us berths. I should think Palestine would be a good place to ship to. The Albatross can be sent out by cargo boat, and we can pick her up at Haifa or somewhere, and with luck we shall be in Tibet and well into our job while the Johnnies at this end are still patting each other on the back at the neat way they put us underground. What do you think of that for a plan? It's better than letting our enemies know that they've failed, and running straight into a firing-party at the other end."

Colin ceased speaking, and for some seconds there was silence; then from the boys' uncle there came a chuckle of grim mirth.

"Well thought, Colin lad, well thought indeed! I used to think I was smart, but there was I going to blazon our escape abroad when our enemies have supplied us with a better disguise than we could ever have found in a hundred years. With John Hanson

and his nephews dead and buried, no one will be looking for John Hanson and his nephews, and we'll start our task with a far better chance of success. Off with you, Dick. Get hold of a responsible Doctor Sahib and an ambulance and bring them out here. That's your job. Once they're here I'll do the talking."

CHAPTER III

First Lap

It is astonishing what power a word from Authority will have even in a free democratic country like Great Britain. The doctor and the ambulance attendants, who were finally piloted by Dick to the scene of the assault, were inclined to be testy when they found that there were not three bodies awaiting removal, but a few words from the boys' uncle had a wonderfully soothing effect, and when later John Hanson got on to Staunton Travers at his home, and the little man spoke to the hospital authorities the result was marvellous. A separate suite of rooms was placed at the service of the travellers, the doctor, the ambulance men, the nurse and servants in attendance were sworn to secrecy, and there for six days they remained in seclusion, dependent on the newspapers, the wireless and the telephone for news of the world without, while John Hanson's shoulder mended.

Surprisingly, the time did not hang heavily on the boys' shoulders. It was amusing to read their uncle's obituary, and for the first time Colin and Dick learned that their own lives had been considered "promising". More entertaining still were the indignant invectives in the papers calling upon the Government to take action to make the roads safe for travellers against thugs and gunmen, while the harrowing accounts of their own fight for life and final demise from wounds received in the assault moved them to laughter.

"What a shout there will be when we appear again," remarked Dick on the morning of the fifth day as, from the shelter of some carefully drawn curtains, they watched four coffins carried out of the hospital and placed in waiting cars which were to convey them to London. "I must say that chap Travers is doing the thing well."

"It's got to be done well if we're to deceive the mob we're up against," answered Colin; "and I'm not so sure that my plan is much good after all. This part is all right, and I dare say the Mongolians do think we are all dead, but what about when we get on board ship? Our pictures have been in all the newspapers and we'll be recognized in five minutes, and you can't swear a whole shipload of passengers and crew to secrecy."

"H'm! I hadn't realized that. You're right, Colin, a ship's no good. Let's go and tell uncle and see what he says."

John Hanson, however, received them with a grin. His shoulder was healing rapidly, and he was just completing a conversation on the telephone, when the boys entered the room.

"It's all right, Nephews," he replied when Colin had explained their doubts. "I've just been talking to Travers on that very subject. He agrees with you that a ship's no good, so he's made arrangements for us and our gear to be taken to Haifa by a naval flying-boat. That will obviate the risk of recognition, and at Haifa there will be another plane awaiting our own use."

"No, not the Albatross," in answer to a question from Dick. "Travers and I are agreed that to move her at the moment will be too risky. It's quite on the cards that our enemies may be keeping a watch on her

even after what has happened, and if she were to be suddenly flown away they might begin to think, and that is the last thing we want them to do. So there will be another machine waiting us at Haifa, but you can trust Travers to provide us with something good. That's all, I think, Nephews, except that our adventures start again at 10 p.m. to-morrow, and this time I hope we shall get away without being shot at."

That wish at least was gratified, and the following night the four travellers left the hospital unknown to any people except those in the secret, and within two hours Colin, Dick, John Hanson and Larg had reached Southampton, and were on board a large flying-boat in charge of two young flying officers and a mechanic.

"Your gear is all on board, sir," said Flight-Lieutenant Blake, who was in command of the flying-boat, as he greeted the boys' uncle. "Perhaps you would like to go over it, though Mr. Travers was down here and checked it personally."

"That's good enough, Blake. If Travers checked it then I know it's all right. Did he leave any message?"

"Only to wish you good-luck, sir. He was, however, specially urgent that we should get away as soon as possible, so if you are ready we will start at once."

"Start immediately, by all means. Oh! by the way, Blake, let me introduce my nephews, Colin and Richard Grant. They are brethren of the air, and will take over as soon as you have landed us at Haifa."

The boys shook hands with the Flight-Lieutenant and his companion, Flying-Officer Wright, and a few minutes later the great flying-boat was in the air, and they were speeding south. The flight itself was entirely uneventful, and twenty-four hours after the start the boat came to rest on the waters of Haifa harbour, and within a few minutes a motor-boat from

the shore, had drawn alongside. Evidently their arrival was expected.

• “Compliments of Colonel Wade, sir,” said a young subaltern in the stern of the boat, saluting John Hanson. “I’ve a lorry on the quay ready to take your gear straight out to the ’plane. Colonel Wade thinks you should leave Haifa as soon as possible, but he hopes you and your nephews will have an early breakfast with him first.”

“That is very good of Colonel Wade, and we shall be delighted to accept. How are things here? Fairly quiet?”

“So so, sir. Now, sir, if you don’t mind, I’d like to get busy. It’ll be a good thing to get your gear out to the ’plane before it gets light.”

Two hours later, just as dawn was breaking, Colin, Dick and their uncle sat down to breakfast in a big, airy, white-washed room overlooking Haifa harbour. Their host was a tall, alert-looking man with keen blue eyes, and for the first part of the meal the conversation was on ordinary everyday things; then suddenly Colonel Wade changed the subject.

“I know why you’re out here, Hanson,” he said; “and it’s for that reason that I’m shoving you out of Haifa without offering you any hospitality other than a single beggarly meal. You don’t need me to tell you anything about the East, but this place is becoming a very hotbed of intrigue, and if anyone should recognize you and spread the news, all our elaborate precautions would be wasted. By the way, I’ve a cable for you. Arrived last evening from Staunton Travers. It was in code, so I had to decode it, Here it is.” The speaker handed a sheet of paper to John Hanson. “It appears that one of the S.S. men has got back to India from Tibet.”

"One of the S.S. men back!" exclaimed the boys' uncle, while Colin and Dick listened with interest. "Then——"

"No, it's not as simple as all that, unfortunately. The poor chap is stark staring mad, and all that they can get out of him is something about a gong. Read it. Queer business altogether."

John Hanson took the paper, and having read it, passed it to the boys. The message was short and to the point, and Colin and Dick read:

"John Hanson stop Z14 India S.S. sent Tibet six months ago discovered in hills outside Hazra this morning stop Z14 mad stop Only coherent words 'The gong, the gong' repeated continually with every sign of acute terror stop No hope of immediate recovery stop Gong would appear to be something to avoid so sending you warning stop Staunton Travers."

"Well, what do you make of it?" asked the boys' uncle when Colin laid the paper down.

"Nothing," replied Colin and Dick together. "What about you, Uncle? Any ideas?"

"None at all. Still, we'll remember it. The gong. Queer. Never heard anything about an extra special gong anywhere in the East. 'Have you, Wade?' turning to their host.

"Never. I've been cudgelling my brains ever since I read that message, but without result. Sounds pretty devilish though."

"M'm! yes, perhaps." John Hanson folded the sheet of paper and slipped it into a pocket. "Well, Wade, we'd better be off. I agree with you that the less time we spend here and the sooner we are away from civilization, the better it will be. Thanks for the breakfast. Perhaps we'll stop here on our way home, and if so, we'll have a yarn to tell you." * *

"And I'll be glad to hear it," replied the Colonel, shaking the three adventurers warmly by the hand. "Well, good luck and good hunting. Next time you visit me I hope it won't be such an abrupt hail and farewell business. And steer clear of the gong, whatever it is. Sounds nasty to me."

Half an hour later John Hanson, Colin, Dick and Larg were in the air speeding east at two hundred miles an hour in a powerful twin-engined monoplane. Colin was in the pilot's seat, and as he felt the way the beautiful machine responded to every touch of hand and foot a thrill of wild elation swept over him. At last the real adventure had begun, and as far as they could tell they had completely outwitted their adversaries, who pictured them lying cold and stiff under the ground instead of flying towards Tibet. What awaited them there? he wondered. Was something really being hatched in that country which men called the roof of the world, so high were its frozen plateaux and towering mountains, or was the whole thing a scare and a delusion? Hardly that, though. There must be some reason, some big reason, for that attack on them outside Basingstoke. Queer, too, that business of the gong. What was the gong, and what had sent Z14 mad? His thoughts flashed back to the shooting a week before. What sort of man was he to whom belonged that huge white hand decorated with the large golden ring? A giant, surely. Colin felt sure that the owner of that hand was the leader of the gang who had tried to murder them, and he wondered if they would ever meet the man again. In future he would have to watch men's hands, for if ever they came across that big white hand with the great golden ring in Tibet, then danger would be very, very near. No, it was no picnic they were embarked upon; that was already proved, but

then, and Colin grinned, none of them wanted a picnic. What had Staunton Travers called it? The shadow of Tibet? Queer little bloke, Staunton Travers, but, by Jove! there were no flies on him and he knew what he wanted and how to get it. The shadow of Tibet. That was it. They were out to lift the shadow of Tibet, and, by Jove! they were going to do it!

Hour after hour the powerful monoplane flew on. They crossed the Syrian Desert, saw beneath them the mighty Euphrates, flashed over Baghdad, winged their way over the Pushti Koh range and so entered Persia. There Colin handed over controls to Dick, and at Teheran they dropped to earth and, after a swift overhaul, refuelled and were away again. No stopping in Teheran. John Hanson was far too well-known to risk discovery by spending the night in Persia's capital, and it was not until the city of Merv, in Russian Turkistan, came in sight eleven hours after leaving Haifa that the boys' uncle gave the word to descend.

"We'll sleep at Merv, Nephews," he said. "I've never been in Merv, and with ordinary luck we shall merely be put down as three more mad Englishmen trying to break some flying record. And don't forget that on our passports we're plain John Hammond and his two sons. 'Fraid you'll have to put up with me as a father for one night. By to-morrow evening we shall probably be beyond passports, so make the most of your last night in civilization."

CHAPTER IV

Trouble at Merv

As events turned out, the last night in civilization was to prove anything but restful, though the reception extended to the travellers was perfectly friendly, and contained no hint of what lay in store for them. The inhabitants of Merv were mostly Turkomans, and the few European Russian officials present appeared to view the travellers in the very light the boys' uncle had prophesied. At any rate, they stamped their passports without demur, asked no questions about Larg, and in response to a substantial bribe immediately set off to scour the town for sufficient petrol to replenish the tanks of the monoplane.

In this task they proved to be remarkably prompt. Apparently there were only two places in Merv where petrol could be obtained in any bulk, and within two hours a lorry arrived on the flying-field loaded with practically the town's entire supply, and the work of filling the tanks began. Again largesse resulted in willing help, and in a surprisingly short time for the job the entire lorry load had been transferred to the monoplane and the tanks filled to the brim.

"Bit of luck finding all that juice here," remarked Colin, tightening up the last cap. "Now, Uncle, I want you and Dick to go off and have a decent night's rest at the hotel or caravanserai or wherever it is they put up travellers in this place."

John Hansor laughed.

"Giving orders already, Nephew Colin. I thought——"

"I know, Uncle, you're boss of the outfit, but all the same I'm head pilot, and I'm going to spend what's left of daylight going over the plane, and what I can't do this evening I'll do to-morrow, as soon as it gets light. That's one reason why I intend to spend the night here. Another is that I don't think the bus ought to be left, especially with all our gear on board, so if you'll let me have Larg we'll take it in turn to keep watch."

"An excellent idea, Colin, and one which I was going to propose, but why shouldn't Dick and I share in the vigil?"

"Because you're not yet completely recovered from that shoulder wound, that's why. Also there are four of us and we ought to go in twos, so you and Dick go off together and Larg and I will stop here."

"I understand, Nephew. All right, I agree. Come on, Dick. Colin's skipper so long as we're travelling by air, so let's go and see what accommodation Merv has to give us. I'm told that the chief hotel is near the station, Colin, so you'll find us there should you want us."

The elder man and Dick moved away, and with them went most of those who had assisted in the refuelling, but they had hardly been gone ten minutes before Larg, who had remarkably keen hearing, lifted his head and looked towards the west.

"'Nother flying machine coming, young Sahib," he said, addressing Colin who was tinkering with one of the engines. "I hear her. Big machine like ours. See, Sahib, there she is."

Colin straightened himself, and looked in the direction Larg was pointing. At first he could see no

sign of the approaching 'plane in the gathering dusk, though the sound of her engines was already distinctly audible, but a minute later he picked her up swooping down towards Merv.

"Looks as though she is going to land," he remarked. "Lucky we got here first. If the chap in charge of that bus is short of juice he's going to be sorry. Here she comes, and here come the officials and inhabitants of Merv. This is being quite a gala day for Merv, Larg."

"Yes, Sahib," replied the little Gurkha, understanding but a part of what Colin had said. "But what I ask myself, young master, is why do the men in that flying machine come here at all? Is it possible that they are following my Sahib?"

"H'm! That's an idea. Still, I don't think we need get the wind up, Larg. They can't start any rough business before this mob," indicating the crowd who had gathered to welcome the fresh arrivals; "and there will be plenty of time to warn the Sahib if we think it necessary. A thousand to one they've never heard of our existence."

By this time the newcomer was circling round the flying-field, and three minutes later the aeroplane had come to rest upon the ground. She was a twin-engined monoplane of some foreign make, and from her alighted two men. They were an unprepossessing pair. One was a great bear of a man with black hair and beard and of a distinctly Asiatic type, while the second, the pilot, was slim, with sleek dark hair, eyes set too closely together, and a thin cruel mouth.

"Who's in charge here?" barked the pilot almost before his feet touched the ground. "Petrol! Petrol at once. We are in a hurry."

"I am in charge here," replied a big Russian

The Forbidden Land

louncing forward. "Your papers, comrades, I must see your papers."

"Papers!" The pilot uttered some foreign oath, but a muttered word from his companion checked his impatience, and grudgingly he drew a sheaf of papers from a pocket and handed them to the Russian. "Here are my papers. Quick, examine them, and then give me petrol. We must get on. We must fly all night. We are in a hurry."

The Russian, however, was not to be hurried. Slowly and deliberately he examined the papers one by one in spite of the pilot's angry fidgetting, and not till he had checked each paper thoroughly and examined the big man's passport did he hand them back.

"In order, comrades," he said. "There's an hotel near the station where you can stay till to-morrow evening, when the next train——"

"Hotel! We do not want an hotel. I tell you we want petrol. We must start again at once. Fetch us petrol, plenty of petrol. We will pay for it."

The Russian shook his head.

"Sorry, comrades, but there's no petrol in Merv. All the petrol we had is already on board that machine," nodding towards the English monoplane beside which Colin and Larg were standing, interested spectators of the scene; "so you'll have to wait till to-morrow evening when the train brings in a fresh supply. Still, it's a good hotel. My brother-in-law keeps it. You'll——"

The pilot said something which, from the sound, consigned the hotel and all its contents to the nethermost regions, and, turning his back on the Russian, approached Colin.

"You have petrol," he barked sharply. "We will

buy it from you. We will give twice whatever you gave for it, and to-morrow evening you will be able to fill up, and go on your way."

Colin shook his head. The pilot's manner annoyed him, and in any case he did not like the look of either of the newcomers.

"Sorry," he replied, "nothing doing. We're starting first thing in the morning, and we want all the petrol we have."

"You will not sell!" cried the other in amazement.

Colin nodded.

"You've got it," he said. "We want every drop in the tanks, so we can't sell you any."

"But I tell you we are in a hurry. We have to fly all night and our tanks are almost empty, so we must have petrol."

Colin shrugged his shoulders.

"Looks as though you'll have to alter your plans," he remarked, and he was turning away when an outburst of profanity and abuse checked him, and made him swing round again. "Stop that!" he cried, clenching his fists. One of the things John Hanson had caused his nephews to learn was boxing, and at that moment Colin would have liked nothing better than to knock the other down. "If you can't keep a civil tongue, clear out. You'll get no petrol from us, so forget it. The best thing you can do is to get along to the hotel, and sleep off some of your ill-temper."

For a moment the boy thought the other was going to explode, but before the pilot could utter any of the words which trembled on his lips his companion approached, and laid a restraining hand upon his arm.

"You must forgive my comrade," he said, speaking to Colin in English almost as good as the boy's own; "but he is tired and anxious and his nerves are frayed.

It is true we are in a hurry and need petrol, so may I make a suggestion? Name a price for your machine with her tanks full and I will pay it, and at the same time I will make you a present of the machine in which we arrived a short time ago. So you will make a good profit, and to-morrow, when the train comes in, you will be able to fill up and continue your journey much richer. Now, is not that a good offer?"

"It is a good offer, I admit, sir," replied Colin, "but even so I must refuse. We also are in a hurry, and our machine is definitely not for sale."

"So." The monosyllable came from the man's lips like a drop of ice, and for an instant it seemed to Colin that cold naked fury flashed from the speaker's eyes; then the heavy lids dropped and, turning, he laid a hand upon his companion's arm. "Come, my friend," he went on, drawing the pilot away. "We are unlucky. It will have to be the hotel after all, and as we cannot get our petrol let us at least get a good night's sleep. Good night, young sir, and bon voyage."

Now, what exactly was the meaning of that, wondered Colin, as the strangers walked away, taking with them most of the crowd which had collected to watch their arrival. The look in the speaker's eyes had wished them anything but a good voyage, and if he was any judge of character the pilot was the sort of man who would shoot an adversary in the back without the slightest compunction. Who were they? he wondered. What was their mission? Had it anything to do with their own task, and if so, why were they in such a hurry? Questions all these, Colin realized, which he could not possibly answer, so presently he turned back to the plane, to find Larg watching him with dark inscrutable eyes.

"Bad men, young Sahib," growled the little Gurkha. "Swine, dogs, no trust!" He spat disgustedly. "Larg keep his kukri bare to-night. Young Sahib go to sleep, for he drives flying machine, but Larg keep watch. Men say one thing, mean another. They want 'plane. Perhaps come back."

"By Jove! Larg, I wonder if you're right," exclaimed Colin, staring at his companion. "You think they'll come back sometime during the night with the idea of pinching the 'plane?"

Larg nodded vigorously.

"That so, Sahib. Presently they come back when they think the Sahib and Larg asleep. And they say to each other, we will kill that Gurkha rat and his young Sahib, and then we will escape in their flying machine, for it is full of the precious juice which makes her go. But it is not they who will do the killing, Sahib. Larg will keep watch, and when he hears our enemies coming he will wake the young Sahib, and it is they who will be surprised."

"You bet your life they will," responded Colin grimly. "Right-o, Larg. The 'plane seems O.K., and, anyway, it's too dark to do anything more to-night, so we'll feed and then I'll turn in. Only understand, I'm going to take my turn at mounting guard, so when the hands of my watch point to the two ones you must wake me. Got that?"

The little Gurkha grinned in the darkness.

"As the Sahib wills," he replied meekly. "Now let us eat. Our enemies will not return yet. Larg knows their kind. They are snakes who strike in the dark, and not men who fight as men."

Colin and Larg made a silent meal of stores carried in the 'plane. Ought he to warn his uncle? the boy wondered. It seemed hardly necessary, for after all

they were only going on supposition, and it was a pity to disturb the other's rest when his complete recovery, from the shoulder wound was so necessary. Colin decided to let matters remain as they were, and having finished his meal, and repeated his instructions to Larg to awake him at two o'clock, he lay down on the cabin floor, covered himself with a couple of rugs, and was almost instantly fast asleep.

His next conscious realization was the touch of a hand upon his shoulder; then he became aware that someone was shaking him gently, and of a voice whispering in his ear. Colin sat up with a jerk. It was still dark, and a swift glance at his wrist-watch showed him that it was four o'clock. Four o'clock; but he had told the Gurkha to wake him at two! Why——

"Larg," he whispered, and instantly a hand came out of the darkness and covered his mouth.

"Hush, Sahib, do not speak so loud," came his companion's whispered reply. "I did not wake the Sahib as he commanded because he was so fast asleep, and Larg was not tired, but now the time for sleeping is past, for our enemies are coming, as Larg said they would."

"Coming! Where?"

Colin reached out and gripped the butt of the pistol which he had placed by his side before he lay down.

"Quiet, Sahib. They are not here yet. Larg was watching the road which leads to the town, and he saw them. They come slowly, and without noise, as men who wish not to be seen and to take others by surprise. Now, is it the Sahib's orders that we await our enemies outside?"

Colin grinned in spite of a certain tense feeling which seemed to pervade his whole body. The little

man, who knew more about this sort of thing than he was ever likely to learn, was showing the way with great tact.

"It is, Larg. Are you armed?"

"Yes, Sahib. I have my kukri and a pistol which the Uncle Sahib gave me."

"That is good. But we must not shoot these men in cold blood, Larg. If they approach our 'plane we will challenge them. Perhaps if they discover we are awake they will go away."

"Perhaps, Sahib."

Larg's voice sounded as though he would be bitterly disappointed if their enemies did anything so unmanly as to retreat, and a few seconds later he and Colin were in the open, and were crouching down in the shadows on the side of the monoplane away from the town. The night was still and clear, and the faint glow from the stars spread an ethereal glimmer over everything. Where were their enemies? Colin wondered. He could see nothing, hear nothing, and as the stillness and the waiting penetrated into his being Colin became aware of a queer sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, and, though he knew that Larg was a tower of strength, he could not help wishing that Uncle John was present to take command.

Five minutes passed. Colin lay on the ground with ears straining to pick up the slightest sound and eyes which peered into the darkness, but nothing moved within his limited range of vision, no sound broke the silence. What was happening? Was Larg mistaken, or were those men who had arrived late the evening before really prowling about the flying-field? Colin discovered himself glancing nervously over his shoulder, but the same stillness and silence greeted him. In the distant town a dog barked and was answered by

other dogs, but the disturbance soon died down and quiet returned. How much longer? Was nothing ever going to happen? Colin stirred impatiently and instantly a hand came out of the darkness beside him, accompanied by a low warning murmur from Larg. Had the Gurkha heard anything? Again the boy forced himself to listen, and suddenly, from somewhere in front of him, a faint creak reached his ears. Whatever was it? It sounded familiar, and yet— A second time the tiny sound broke the stillness, and all at once Colin knew what had made it. In a flash of memory he again heard the big black-bearded man wish him “bon voyage”, and saw him turn and walk away. And, as he walked, his boots had *creaked*.

Colin gripped his pistol. So Larg was right. Again came the revealing creak, a mere whisper of sound—evidently the wearer was moving with extreme caution—followed by a low murmur of voices. The men were very near, they couldn't be more than fifteen yards away. Creak—creak. In the darkness someone cursed beneath his breath. It sounded like the pilot, and Colin guessed that he was cursing his companion's boots; the next moment Larg's hand touched Colin again, and in the same instant the boy became aware of two dimly visible figures stealthily approaching the darkened monoplane.

Colin felt the scalp of his head tingle as though his hair were beginning to rise, for there was something terribly suggestive of evil about the stealthy approach of those two dark forms vaguely silhouetted against the star-studded sky. What were they going to do? The men had come to a halt about four yards from the 'plane, and were standing motionless as though listening. Did they know that the aeroplane was guarded, Colin wondered, or were they hoping to

steal her without having to overpower the rightful owners? One minute passed, two, and then a faint whisper broke the silence. The men were murmuring together; the next moment the hand of one of them went to his belt, to reappear an instant later with something long and narrow in its grasp, something which picked up the faint starlight and reflected it with a dull metallic glint.

A knife! *A knife!* A cold shiver of rage shot through Colin as he realized the significance of that length of steel, and, with the knowledge of the purpose for which that knife was intended, any compunction about using the pistol in his hand vanished like a puff of smoke. Again came a whisper from the other side of the 'plane, followed by the sounds of stealthy approach, and at the same time Colin and Larg rose silently to their feet and began to creep round the tail of the machine. They made no sound, or if they did, their enemies heard nothing, and coming round the 'plane they caught sight of two black figures standing close up against the monoplane, and evidently trying to locate the handle of the cabin door. Apparently it was difficult to find in the darkness, for a muttered curse came from one of them; a second later Colin had pressed the button of a torch held in his left hand and had flooded the scene with light.

"Hands up, or we shoot!"

The surprise was complete, and for a second or two, after Colin's abrupt command had shattered the silence, the robbers remained frozen into immobility by astonishment. The pilot, he who held the knife, stood with one arm raised against the side of the aeroplane as though he still sought the handle of the cabin door, while his companion remained with body bent in an attitude suggesting that he was offering

the other a back-up; then, like a picture falling to pieces, the scene dissolved with amazing speed. The pilot's hand dropped, the big man straightened himself and sprang aside; the next instant Colin caught a glimpse of a long blade flashing aloft, and ducked just in time to escape the shining steel as it shot through the air within an inch of his head.

"Put out the light, Sahib!"

Colin switched off the torch and fired at the same instant. Crack! That must be Larg's pistol, for the sound came from close at hand on his right. In front of the boy a stab of flame shattered the darkness, and he felt a vicious pull at the sleeve of his coat; then he fired again, and this time his shot was answered by a scream of pain and the thud of running feet.

So he had hit somebody, and the enemy were in retreat. Another stab of flame split the blackness and Colin heard the thud of the bullet as it crashed into the monoplane. And now for a minute the night was full of the sound of conflict. The enemy had taken up a position some way from the monoplane, and were keeping up a brisk fusillade while Colin and Larg, lying prone on the ground, fired at the flashes as fast as they could load. Thud! A bullet struck the ground close by Colin's side, and taking careful aim at the point from which the shot had come the boy pressed the trigger of his pistol. Crack! Crack! Larg had fired at the same instant, and either one or both bullets had found a mark, for a scream came out of the darkness, followed by a groan and the sound of something falling. One of the would-be murderers was out of the fight. Colin stared into the night. From some distance away came a rapid creak, creak, and the boy fired at the sound; then Larg called to him, and the next moment he caught sight of the little man silhouetted against the sky and

following those retreating sounds at a quick silent run.

“Larg!”

Colin called after the Gurkha to bid him stop, but all that issued from his throat was a hoarse croak, and before he could call again a low vicious swish reached his ears followed by an abrupt termination of the creaking sounds. For a moment the boy felt violently sick. He had seen Larg do wonderful things with his kukri, that cruel curved blade of the Gurkha hillmen, and he knew too well what that swish portended. He rose to his feet, and by an effort pulled himself together. He must get used to this sort of thing, for there would be plenty of it before their journey was ended, and anyway, these men had brought it on themselves. They had come to rob and kill, and justice had decreed that they should be the sufferers. Colin switched on his torch, and made his way over the ground till he came upon the man who had been shot. It was the pilot, and as the light shone upon him he opened his eyes, and made a swift grab at the pistol on the ground by his side. But Colin kicked it out of his reach, and was answered by an outburst of furious oaths.

“I’ll get you, you——Englishman!” he screamed.
“I’ll get you for this. I’ll—I’ll——”

The fierce voice died away, and the speaker dropped back in a faint, and kneeling on the ground Colin made a swift examination of his wounds. One bullet had struck his left shoulder, and the second appeared to have gone through his right thigh. Colin was conscious of a feeling of relief. The wounds were not serious, and the man would recover if properly cared for. But what were they to do with him? For the first time the difficulties of their position came home to Colin. They were on foreign soil, and they had killed

one man and wounded another, and there was only his word that they had been attacked. At the very best they would be delayed, and delay at this stage—— He was aware of hurried footsteps approaching, and, raising the torch, saw Larg running toward him.

"Hullo, Larg," he cried, "what——"

But the little man was taking no notice, and coming to a halt by Colin's side he raised his right hand which still held the curved kukri, and pointed towards the town.

"Look, Sahib," he cried. "The people in the town have heard the fight, and are coming to see what has happened. Now what shall we do, Sahib? We cannot fight them all; yet it is not good to be caught with dead and wounded men."

Colin sprang to his feet, and for the first time he became aware of a crowd of lights about half a mile away and streaming in their direction. Larg was right, Merv had taken alarm, and if that crowd turned nasty, things might be very unpleasant indeed. Colin had counted on explaining the matter to a few responsible officials, but a crowd at night, undisciplined and without leaders, might do anything, and here, at the very outset, their mission was threatened with disaster. What was he to do? For some seconds the boy stood irresolute; then suddenly his mind was made up, and he began speaking to Larg in swift, brief sentences.

"Listen, Larg," he said. "I'm going to take the monoplane out of here at once. I'll fly east. You disappear into the darkness, go to the hotel where my brother and the Uncle Sahib are staying, wake them up, and tell them they must leave Merv at once. Got that? Good. Tell them to travel east. I shan't fly

far, and I'll be on the look-out for you all and pick you up as soon as I can. Understand? Right! Off you go."

The little man disappeared like a shadow into the gloom while Colin raced towards the monoplane. The oncoming crowd was not more than five hundred yards away, and there was none too much time. Colin clambered into the cockpit and grasped the controls. He pressed the self-starter and the great engines awoke to life. No time to warm them up. The roar of the engines was growing louder and louder, but still they did not drown a shout of anger from the oncoming crowd, and gazing out of the windows Colin saw the inhabitants of Merv surging towards him in waves of twinkling lights. Would he do it? Just. He opened the throttles and the thunder of the engines rose to a deafening crescendo. And now the monoplane was beginning to move. Faster and faster she bumped over the none too even ground. From the approaching crowd came yells of rage, and out of the corners of his eyes Colin caught sight of several sharp flashes, and knew that some in the crowd were firing at him. Faster and faster moved the monoplane. Colin eased back the stick, and suddenly the bumping ceased. She was in the air. Wider he opened the throttles. Up and up rushed the great machine. The lights below were growing smaller and smaller. Colin swung the monoplane round towards the east, and for the first time became conscious of a faint rosy glow. At the sight, his spirits suddenly lightened. He was away, and with any luck Uncle John and Dick and Larg would also be away before the crowd below awoke to the fact that they might still be in Merv. Colin looked down. Merv was already almost out of sight, and as soon as there was light enough to choose a suitable

place he would land again. It would be some time yet before the others could join him, and there was no object in wasting precious petrol.

CHAPTER V

'Forced Landing

Colin eventually landed about twenty miles out of Merv on a flat plain which afforded him a good view in all directions. The plain appeared to be uninhabited, and having eaten some breakfast the boy settled himself to wait. How long before the others would appear? he wondered. It all depended on whether they had been able to commandeer some form of conveyance or not. If they had got hold of a car with some petrol in the tank, he might expect them soon, but if they were footing it, matters wouldn't look anything like so rosy.

The boy looked at his watch, and was astonished to find that it was only an hour since he had made his spectacular departure. An hour. Allowing half an hour for Larg to reach the hotel, and for the fugitives to effect their escape, that meant they had been just thirty minutes on the road. Thirty minutes. That allowed two miles on foot, but, on the other hand, if they had obtained the use of a car they might be arriving in his neighbourhood very soon now. Colin stood up and looked about him. Except for some birds there was not a living thing in sight, and after a brief hesitation he went over to the monoplane and climbed again into the cockpit. He would go and reconnoitre. He couldn't sit there doing nothing, and in any case the sooner he picked the others up, and they were on their way again, the better for all concerned.

Three minutes later he was in the air, and cruising back towards Merv at a height of one thousand feet, and he had not been flying more than five minutes before he saw in front of him and below a long line of black dots moving swiftly over the ground. What were they? Men? They looked too big for men, and certainly no man could run at that pace. Colin picked up a pair of field-glasses and focussed them on the centre of the moving line. Up to that moment he had somehow felt sure that his friends would escape undetected, but now an exclamation of dismay burst from his lips as the powerful glasses picked up the grim visage and swaying body of a swarthy Turkoman. The man had a rifle sticking up behind his right shoulder, and he was urging a small pichald horse along at a breakneck gallop. Horses! Colin cursed himself for a fool. Why hadn't he thought of horses before? Swiftly the boy swept the line with the glasses, counting thirty riders in all; then came a gap of about half a mile, and finally three other horsemen appeared tearing over the ground at headlong speed. Three! Colin took one glance, dropped the glasses, and the next moment he had kicked over the rudder bar and was sweeping down towards the earth in a wide curve. Three! It hadn't needed the glasses to tell Colin who those three were, and now, as he dived earthwards, he swiftly calculated the chances of picking them up before their pursuers could overtake them.

It would be touch and go, that was certain. Colin eased back the stick and slightly flattened the angle of descent. The whole rescue would depend on perfect timing. One mistake and the pursuing horsemen would be all round the monoplane before he could get her into the air again. For an instant the boy played with the idea of flying straight at the head of

the column and brushing the leading pursuers out of existence, but the risks were too tremendous, and in any case why should he kill men who were only doing what they thought was their duty? Colin eased back the stick still farther. By this time he was flying about a hundred feet from the ground, and almost in line with the fugitives. The boy raised a hand and waved, and saw his uncle wave back; then he glanced behind. The pursuers were still half a mile away. So the fugitives were holding their own. Colin moved the rudder, and edged in towards the horsemen. Their mounts were evidently unused to aeroplanes, for they appeared to be giving trouble, and after a single glance the boy swept ahead and came to earth about four hundred yards in front of the riders.

Like a shot Colin was out of the pilot's seat and had flung open the cabin door. Now came the crucial moments. Dick was in front, and as he thundered up he dragged his horse to a stop, and an instant later had leapt to the ground and was running towards the 'plane. Colin gripped hold of a hand and dragged him in.

"Stand by to help the others!" he shouted, and dashed back to the cockpit.

Would they do it? The engines were turning over, and with his hand upon the throttle Colin glanced behind. As he did so the sound of trampling hoofs told him that Larg and his uncle had arrived, and three seconds later the little Gurkha was climbing into the 'plane. Colin opened the throttles and the engines awoke to roaring life. Now Dick and Larg were dragging John Hanson into the cabin, and the monoplane was beginning to move. Colin opened the throttles wider and she moved faster, but already the thunder of the pursuers' approach was sounding in his ears, and suddenly the boy saw a wild-looking rider

dash past and, swinging in his saddle, fire point-blank at the monoplane. Smack! Colin heard the bullet strike the machine and pass through the cockpit above his head. Another rider came into view and another, and, realizing that it was then or never, the boy flung open the throttles, pulled back the stick, and with a deafening roar and lurch the great machine left the ground.

They were up, but they were not yet away. Colin was conscious of a swarm of horsemen on the earth below, of the sharp bang of rifles and the angry rip of bullets against the metal body of the aeroplane. Pray Heaven none of those bullets struck a vital part! From the cabin behind came a series of loud reports, and the boy guessed that his companions were returning their adversaries' fire. So the men below weren't having everything their own way, that was a blessing. And all this was happening because two dirty foreigners had tried to pinch their 'plane. Colin kicked over the rudder bar and swung away from the enemy, and a few seconds later they were out of range. He eased down to normal cruising speed.

Well, that was that, and they were safely out of a bad place; at least he hoped so. The boy glanced back over his shoulder, and was relieved to see his companions apparently unhurt, so he beckoned to Dick to take his place, and having handed over the controls he went back into the cabin and dropped into a seat beside his uncle.

"All right?" he asked.

John Hanson nodded.

"Yes, thanks to you and Larg, Nephew. Luckily the uproar in the town had aroused us, and we were awake and dressed when Larg arrived. So we followed him at once, and he took us to a corral where he had

seen some horses, only unfortunately someone spotted us making off, hence the pursuit."

Colin nodded, and went on to tell his uncle about the happenings of the previous evening after he and Dick had left.

"Bad business altogether," he concluded. "There's one man dead back there and another wounded, and if ever that pilot chap gets well and starts on our trail he'll be after blood. Queer affair! Why were they in such a desperate hurry? Where were they going? I've been wondering if they were concerned in our show at all."

"Maybe. Perhaps one day we'll know, perhaps never," replied the elder man. "Anyway, Colin, they brought it on themselves, so don't let that worry you. Now, how are we off for petrol, Nephew?"

"Enough for about fifteen hundred miles, Uncle. You know we planned to fly due east across the Pamir Plateau into Chinese Turkestan, and then turn south into Tibet. If all goes well, we've plenty of juice to take us to that monastery you spoke about, and where the old bus will have to be abandoned."

"The Monastery of Zong. Yes, that's our real starting point. I have friends there who will tell me all they know, and who will help us on our way." John Hanson smiled. "We've had a stormy start, Nephew, but the thunder and the lightning have passed us by, so let's look upon it as a good augury for the future. Boy, you look tired. Why not turn in for a sleep while Dick pilots the monoplane?"

Colin yawned.

"I'm going to, Uncle. Dick knows the course as well as I do. Still, wake me if there's any doubt or anything goes wrong."

He yawned again, and having dragged a rug from

where it had lain since Larg had awoken him that morning, he made himself comfortable in the deep cabin seat, and a few minutes afterwards he was fast asleep.

Four hours later he awoke. The sun was shining into the cabin, lighting up the figures of Larg, curled up asleep upon the floor, and of his uncle seated a few feet away, deep in the study of a large map. Colin listened, as all true airmen do, to the sound of the engines, and having assured himself that there was nothing amiss there, shifted his body to a more comfortable position. The movement attracted the elder man's attention, and raising his eyes from the map he looked round.

"Hullo," he said; "had a good nap?"

"Yes, thank you, Uncle. How are things going? Got any idea where we are?"

"We've just crossed the Pamir Plateau, and Yarkand should be about fifty miles ahead. I reckon, Colin, that if we keep on due east for another two hundred miles after passing Yarkand and then turn south we shall be in a direct line with Zong." He grinned faintly. "You and Dick, Colin, will be the second and third white men ever to set eyes on Zong. It is a very holy place, and, more important so far as we are concerned, it's right off the beaten track, which is why I am hoping we shall reach there unobserved." He paused a moment; then went on: "I'm banking, as you know, Colin, on whatever is taking place in Tibet being centred somewhere behind the two hundred miles of mountains between Kashmir and Nepal. It seems the most likely spot."

"And if you're wrong, Uncle?"

"If I'm wrong, Nephew, it will mean some more hundreds of miles added to the weary trail ahead of

us, that's all." John Hanson pointed below. "See, Colin, there's Yarkand straight in front. Go and tell Dick the course, or he'll be turning south before it's time."

Colin nodded, and, rising to his feet, moved slowly towards the cockpit, feasting his eyes meanwhile on the strange land below. It hardly seemed possible that it was less than three days since they had left England, and he grinned at the thought that if the rest of the trip was like the last twenty-four hours, they were in for a hectic time indeed. He pushed back the triplex glass door which separated the cabin from the cockpit, and dropped into the vacant seat beside his brother. The younger boy nodded, and Colin passed on their uncle's instructions, at the same time asking if he should take over. But Dick shook his head. He was not feeling at all tired, and would keep on a bit longer. So Colin settled himself comfortably in his seat, and started to watch the changing panorama below.

Yarkand had already been left behind, and they were now flying over a desolate waste which stretched ahead into the distance as far as eyes could see. Colin shivered. What a country! If anything went wrong with the bus and they were forced to land, they would be in a hole indeed. Again he listened to the rhythmic roar of the engines, but could detect no disturbing note. They were all right. The monoplane would take them to Zong safely enough, and there John Hanson and Colin and Dick Grant would cease to exist, and in their places would appear three fierce-looking, ragged but well-armed tribesmen such as might be found wandering anywhere over those parts of Asia. What luck that he and Dick could speak Pushtu and Tibetan, learned from the little Gurkha. With those and the Jagatai Turkish Uncle John had taught them they could go

almost anywhere. Queer that Uncle John should have insisted on their learning Jagatai Turkish. Had he always intended that one day they should accompany him to this part of the world? It looked like it. Then little Staunton Travers had stepped into their lives, and here they were.

Colin looked at his watch. Another half-hour and they would turn south. He glanced below. The country was the most desolate he had ever seen, and shone like a great copper shield in the fierce sunlight. He looked back into the cabin. Larg had woken up, and he and the boys' uncle were talking together. Stout man Larg, and going to be worth his weight in gold in the job ahead. Colin's thoughts swung round to that job. What were they going to find? Was it really possible that Mongolia had laid secret hands on Tibet, and was burrowing a way through the mountain barrier into India? Out here, above that shining coppery desert, the idea didn't sound so mad as it had back in sheltered England. Anything might happen in such a land, and in Tibet, still almost an unknown country, what was to prevent—

Colin's thoughts came to a sudden startling conclusion. Dick was shouting at him, and the sound of the engines was losing its comforting deep-throated roar. Colin sat up with a jerk. Dick was juggling desperately with the petrol controls, and nothing was happening. Petrol! But there ought to be enough juice for several hundred more miles. He shouted to Dick, and his brother turned an anxious face and shook his head. "Empty!" he yelled. Empty. Impossible! Colin signed to Dick, and the younger boy vacated the pilot's seat and allowed his brother to slip into his place. Empty. Dick was right. No petrol was coming through, and the engines were stopping.

They must land and see what had happened. Perhaps it was something they could put right. The boy tried to clutch at the comforting thought, but it was no good. He remembered the bullets which had ripped through the plane outside Merv. Punctured tanks, and for mile after mile the precious fluid had been spilling itself into the void. He turned to Dick. "Tell Uncle we're going to land," he yelled, then busied himself with the controls. Already the monoplane was losing height, and pushing forward the stick, Colin put the machine into a glide. What sort of landing was it? he wondered. The desert seemed to be fairly level. He kicked over the rudder bar to avoid what looked like a large sand dune, and picked out a seemingly smooth run about five hundred feet below. They were almost down. Colin pulled back the stick and flattened out, and a minute later the monoplane touched earth, bumped, touched earth again, gave another bump, and then trundled to a stop with her landing-wheels half-buried in the sand.

Colin wiped the perspiration from his forehead, and glanced over his shoulder. His uncle hadn't moved from his seat, and leaving the cockpit Colin entered the cabin. John Hanson raised his eyebrows.

"Dick says the petrol has given out. Is he right?"

"Looks like it, Uncle."

Colin wrenched open the cabin door and leapt to the ground followed by Dick. Several bullet holes were visible in the wings, and suddenly the younger boy caught hold of his brother's arm and pointed to two holes from which some drops of petrol were still falling on to the desert sand.

"Punctured, Colin," he said in an awed voice. "Looks as though the old bus is here for keeps."

Colin nodded gravely.

“For keeps, Dick,” he replied. “Come on, let’s tell Uncle. The foot-slogging is going to start sooner than we expected.”

CHAPTER VI

Desert Law

John Hanson looked grave on hearing his nephews' news. Here was disaster indeed. The affray at Merv was bad enough, but to be stranded so far from their base, in the middle of a desert in Chinese Turkestan, was infinitely more serious. In silence he picked up a map of the country and began to study it.

"Any idea where we are, Uncle?" asked Dick after a long pause, during which the elder man had remained poring over the map.

"Yes, we have come down in the Tarim Desert," replied the boys' uncle, raising his eyes from the map. "Just about here," indicating a certain spot with a finger. "Roughly I reckon we are about one hundred and eighty miles from Khotan and about two hundred miles from the frontier of Tibet, which means three hundred miles from Zong."

"Three hundred miles from Zong!"

The exclamation came from Colin, and his uncle answered with a confirmatory nod.

"Yes, three hundred miles from Zong, but at the moment it is not the distance which is worrying me so much as our water-supply. With care we may make the water we have with us last two or perhaps even three days, but what then? This is a desert, remember, and our lives may depend on finding an oasis. That is the dark side of the picture. On the other hand, we may find an oasis, or we may come across a friendly

tribe willing to help us. So don't look so despondent, Nephews. The first thing is to go through our gear and discard everything not absolutely necessary, and when that is done, the sooner we start the better."

Discarding proved to be a very difficult task. It seemed to Colin and Dick that everything they had brought with them was indispensable, and they were still wrestling with the problem of what they must take and what they must leave behind when a faint humming fell upon their ears. What was happening? The boys looked up from their task and saw their uncle staring anxiously out of the cabin windows. The next instant a scrambling sound made them turn their heads, and they saw Larg, who had been working outside, climbing hurriedly into the cabin, anxiety written plainly all over his usually happy face.

"Bourane, Sahib, bourane!" he cried.

He shut the door behind him with a bang, and even as the sound still echoed in the boys' ears the scene outside the cabin of the monoplane seemed to dissolve and change. In a moment the low humming had risen to a devastating shriek, and on all sides the desert began to rise up in innumerable columns of whirling sand, while from the windward side of the stranded aeroplane came a pattering sound rising in a breath to an ear-splitting crescendo, until it sounded as though the cabin was being bombarded by swarms of bullets.

"Shut that window!"

His uncle's shout roused Colin from his amazed immobility, and with a leap he was across the cabin and dragging at the sliding frame. A single glance had shown him a grey wall of driving sand; then he shut his eyes to keep out the flying particles which poured in through the open window and lashed his flesh like millions of needles. Colin cursed. The thing had

stuck. He gripped hold of the window-frame with both hands, and threw his whole weight into the effort. A pebble struck him on the forehead, another glanced off one cheek. "Confound the thing! Ah! it was moving, and suddenly, with a grinding jerk, the frame shot across into position, and Colin subsided with a thud into the nearest seat.

Slowly he opened his eyes. He seemed to be covered with sand. There was sand down his neck, sand up his sleeves, sand in his mouth, his eyes, his ears, his nostrils, sand in fact everywhere; then an amused chuckle sounded above the uproar without, and he became aware of Dick trying to sweep up the sand which had penetrated into the cabin, and of their uncle and Larg regarding them with broad smiles.

"Well, Nephews, your baptism as adventurers is proceeding apace, there is no doubt about that," remarked the former, his smile deepening as Colin strove to rid himself of his covering of grit. "Our car is deliberately wrecked, an armed attempt is made to steal our 'plane, some of us are pursued on horseback and another rescues the fugitives from the air, we are fired at as we escape, our monoplane is forced down in the middle of a desert, and now, to complete the baptism, we are visited by the dreaded bourane of Chinese Turkestan. An unusual sequence of events in so short a space of time, and I'd like to say, Nephews, that I consider you have come through with colours flying."

Dick straightened himself.

"Thanks, Uncle," he replied, "but it seems to me that what we have done has all been done by Colin so far."

"Not wholly, Dick. You've stood up well to things which might have unnerved many a man, and I was

pleasurably surprised to discover how safe I felt when you were in the pilot's seat." "He turned to look out of the window. "What do you think of a bourane, Nephews? This one looks like a particularly violent specimen, and may quite likely last for hours."

In this John Hanson proved correct. Hour after hour the hurricane raged, driving the sand before it in grey opaque clouds. The din was terrific, and at times it seemed as though the very 'plane was going to be plucked up into the air by the whirling spouts of sand, and it was not until evening was approaching that brief lulls began to break the ferocity of the hurricane. It was during one of these that Larg suddenly raised his head, and in the same instant Dick uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"Did you hear it?" he cried. "A voice. I'm sure I heard someone calling."

The boys' uncle looked at Larg, and the little man nodded his head.

"The Sahib Dick is right," he said. "Someone called for help out of the storm."

"For help!"

"Yes, Sahib. The cry came from over there," and the Gurkha raised an arm and pointed into the storm which had already recovered from its brief lull.

John Hanson rose to his feet, but Dick pushed him back into his seat.

"You can't go, Uncle," he protested. "Your——"

"Nephew." The elder man's voice was sharp, but Dick went on unheeding the interruption.

"No, you can't. If there's anyone out there needing help we'll probably have to carry him back to the 'plane, and your shoulder won't stand that yet awhile. Colin, Larg and I will go. We'll tie ourselves together with a length of that rope we brought, and if you hold

the other end we shall be sure of finding our way back to the plane. Whoever called can't be very far away, or we should not have heard him."

"Dick is right, Uncle," joined in Colin before the other could reply. "This is our job, isn't it, Larg?"

"Yes, young Sahib," replied the little man. "Sahib," he looked at his master, "we are in the middle of the Tarim Desert, and shall need all our strength to get out of it alive, and if you hurt your shoulder now then our chances will be fewer."

"Three to one." John Hanson smiled grimly. "All right, go ahead. Only, tie yourselves together as Dick suggests, and cover your heads. Quick now, and you'll be able to take advantage of the next lull."

Preparations were soon made. A coil of thin but very strong rope was produced, and with this the rescuers tied themselves together, and they had just completed their precautions when the lull came.

"Now's your chance."

The boys' uncle flung open the cabin door, letting in the shriek of the wind and a driving blast of sand; then, as the rescuers covered their heads and plunged into the storm, the faint cry which Dick had heard again reached them.

"On our right, Larg," shouted Colin to the Gurkha, who was leading the line.

The little man shouted some reply, and with heads bent against the screaming wind the little party floundered forward. Now for the first time the boys learnt something of the ferocity of the dreaded bourane. Even during the lull the wind seemed to tear at them with a thousand clutching hands. Again the feeble cry reached them, carried by the storm and apparently

coming from some point just ahead; the next instant, with a shriek as though a million demons were screaming all at once, the hurricane swooped down upon them again, almost lifting them 'off their feet and halting their slow progress as though they had suddenly come up against a wall of stone.

Would they ever do it? the boys wondered. Breathing was an agony and the sand drove through their clothes until their bodies felt as though they were being rubbed with a rasp. Dick tried to lift a leg, and instantly the wind threw him off his balance and he would have fallen to the ground but for the supporting rope. So for a minute, which seemed an hour, the rescuers remained rooted to the spot whereon they stood, barely holding their own against the terrific blast; then suddenly the wind lulled, and Larg began to forge forward again.

"Shout, Sahibs!" cried the little man at the top of his voice.

Colin and Dick let out a yell in which the Gurkha joined, and immediately the reply came from somewhere almost at their feet. Larg stumbled forward, the boys following, and thirty seconds later he was bending over a huddled heap half-buried in the sand. It was a youth of about the boys' own age, that much they could see in the dim light, and as the rescuers grouped round him a low moan came from his lips.

"Quick, Sahibs," gasped Larg, gripping the youth under the arms and jerking him free of the clinging grit. "Sahib Colin, you and I will carry him, and, Sahib Dick, you lead the way back to the 'plane. Hurry now, Sahibs, the bourane is ever fiercest as it dies."

Colin and Larg raised the rescued youth, but hardly had they done so when the hurricane again swooped

down upon them, forcing them to their knees. Dick caught hold of Colin and strove desperately to raise him to his feet. With an effort he succeeded; then, as Larg struggled into a standing position again, the slow retreat began. This proved to be almost more difficult than fighting their way against the wind, for now the rescuers had to lean back against the storm to save themselves from being blown forward on their faces. It was a nightmare journey. Foot by foot Dick coiled in the guiding rope, while the hurricane shrieked and screamed and yelled like a thing possessed, battering them with sand and small stones as though furious at being robbed of its intended prey. There was no sense of direction. Sight was reduced to less than a couple of feet, and the rope upon which the safety of all depended seemed to lead away into nothingness. Where was the 'plane? For a second Dick was conscious of a surge of panic. Suppose a stone had cut the rope? If so, they were lost indeed, but even as the thought flashed through his mind a reassuring tug came out of the darkness, and half a minute later a shadow loomed up ahead. Dick uttered a shout of thankfulness, and the next moment he had bumped into the side of the monoplane.

Two minutes afterwards they were all safely inside the cabin again, and John Hanson was pouring brandy down the rescued boy's throat. He was a short sturdy youth, fair complexioned, though his broad nose, small slanting eyes and high cheek-bones proclaimed him of Tartar stock. He was clothed in a long woollen cloak and high boots and wore a woollen cap upon his head, but at the moment his rescuers were more concerned with the ghastly pallor which overspread the boy's face.

"Looks like a Kirghiz to me," said the boys' uncle,

sitting back on his heels and regarding the stranger critically; "but what he's doing out here in the desert and so far from his native mountains beats me. Maybe we're nearer the mountains than we imagined, and if so, all the better for us, though if that were the case we should surely have sighted them this morning."

"I'm not so sure, Uncle," replied Dick. "There was a haze to the south, and visibility was pretty bad. I doubt if we should have seen any mountains over twenty miles away."

"That so? Then perhaps we're not so badly situated as I feared." The speaker slipped a hand under the boy's clothing and laid it on his heart. "Exhaustion followed by partial suffocation. Lost his way, probably, and has been tramping through the storm for hours. But you brought him in just in time and he'll pull through. These Kirghiz are as tough as steel." He rose to his feet, and peered out of a window. The bourane was noticeably diminishing in violence, but at the same time darkness was already setting in. "We'll have to spend the night here," he went on, turning away from the window and glancing at his companions. "Bad business, but there it is." He looked at the Kirghiz youth, whose colour was slowly improving. "Perhaps he'll be able to help us. Larg," to the little Gurkha, "get out the primus and prepare a meal. Something warm will do us all good, especially our new recruit."

At that moment the rescued boy opened his eyes, and at sight of the strange people and stranger surroundings a look of terror shot across his face. But John Hanson spoke to him in his own language, and as the familiar Jagatai Turkish fell upon his ears the look of terror gave place to an expression of pleased

surprise, and he began to talk so fast that the boys could not follow him, and their uncle had to translate his meaning.

"His name is Norbo, and he says he's the son of a Kirghiz chief. 'Pears you're right, Dick, and we're within measurable distance of the mountains, which is a huge bit of luck. According to Norbo, his tribe are camped in the foothills about twenty miles away. This morning they discovered that some camels had strayed, so he and three companions set out on horseback to find them. But the beasts had wandered out into the desert, and they were still hunting them when the bourane caught them. Norbo says it is the worst storm he's ever experienced, and somehow he and his companions got separated. Then Norbo's horse fell and broke a leg, and after that the boy seems to have wandered about for hours trying to find his way home, until at last we found him in the final stages of exhaustion, and brought him here. Hullo! our young friend smells Larg's cooking, and there's a hungry look on his face."

Norbo proved to be a merry soul. He quickly recovered from the effects of the storm, and then the amount of food he put away made the boys open their eyes in astonishment. Also, he appeared to be inordinately grateful for what they had done, and swore that he was their servant, and that his father, the chief, would thank them for having saved his life.

Colin looked across at his uncle.

"Seems as though our good deeds are coming home to roost, eh, Uncle?" he said. "The friendship of a chief ought to be pretty useful in this part of the world."

"Very useful, Colin. The Kirghiz are born nomads. They wander all over the mountains of Turkestan,

and if this boy's father is really grateful to us, as I have no doubt he will be, for Norbo is his only son, there is no calculating what he will do. This is the first bit of luck we've had this trip, and if we can persuade the chief to take us down into Tibet it's going to ease things tremendously."

By this time night had fallen, and the bourane had ceased almost as suddenly as it had begun. The interior of the cabin was thick with sand, but the travellers were too weary to worry about such a trifle, and Norbo, as soon as he learned he was to spend the night with his new friends, curled himself up on the floor like a dog and was instantly fast asleep.

"Better follow their example, Nephews," remarked the boys' uncle, as Larg prepared to do likewise. "There's a long day ahead of us to-morrow, and we didn't get much sleep last night. And don't stint the blankets. Nights have a way of being surprisingly cold in this part of the world."

He suited his actions to his words, and in a very short space of time no sound broke the silence of the cabin of the wrecked monoplane save the regular breathing of five sleepers. Certainly Colin and Dick had no cause to complain of their night's rest, and they awoke the next morning to hear the purring of the primus as Larg prepared breakfast, and to see the sun pouring in through the cabin windows.

"Hullo, Nephews, awake?" cried the voice of their uncle from the other end of the cabin. "Well, the bourane has done one good thing, it's cleared away the haze. Behold the mountains."

He raised a hand and pointed south, and following the direction indicated the boys saw a range of mountains about thirty miles away, while beyond them in

the dim distance, seemingly reaching to the blue sky, was a line of snowy peaks.

"The Altyn Tagh and the Kunlun Mountains, Nephews," went on the speaker. "Those in the far distance are the Kunlun Range, and they are in Tibet, and are among the most difficult mountains in the world. They are also one of the reasons why the rescue of Norbo is such luck. I had hoped to cross the Kunlun by air in an hour, whereas on foot such a task might well have proved impossible, but now if Norbo's father proves sufficiently grateful I hope to persuade him to see us through. The company of a dozen sturdy Kirghiz with pack animals to carry our gear will mean all the difference between success and——" The speaker paused for a moment, then added the one word, "death."

Colin looked up sharply.

"Death," he repeated. "Was it as bad as all that, Uncle, when we crashed yesterday?"

"As bad as all that, Colin."

"But you didn't tell us."

The elder man laughed.

"What good would have been done by telling you, Nephew? Besides, while there's life there's always the chance that something will turn up, as the rescue of Norbo proved. Hullo! our young friend has found some companions. Looks as though his father was abroad early searching for him, and here they come."

The boys looked up to see a little group approaching the wrecked monoplane. In front rode a tall man mounted on a small sturdy horse. A rifle was slung across his shoulders, and Norbo was trotting by his side talking eagerly as he ran, while close behind followed two other Kirghiz tribesmen similarly armed and mounted. John Hanson stepped out into the

open, followed by Colin and Dick, and as the horsemen rode up the chief raised his right hand in salute.

"Greeting, White Men," he said, reining his horse to a halt. "My son has told me how you saved his life when the storm devil had him in its keeping. It was a brave deed."

"A deed all men would have done, Chief," replied the boys' uncle, returning the salute. "Moreover, it was not I who saved his life, but these two young men of my family and my servant here," pointing to Larg, "who tore him from the grip of the storm devil."

"Nevertheless, White Man, a life has been saved, and that life the life of my only son. How run the words? An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a life for a life. What do you ask, White Men, in return for this life you have saved?"

"We ask nothing, Chief."

"Nothing." Suddenly the grim face of the Kirghiz chief creased in a smile. "Now, by Allah, here are men after my heart! Nevertheless, strangers, it cannot be. A life for a life, that is the law of the desert. So name your price, White Men, for I am grateful for the life of my son which you have given back to me, and a grateful man pays his debts." He eyed the monoplane, already half-buried in the sand, with lively curiosity. "I have seen some of these things that fly, White Chief," he went on; "but it seems to me that the desert has taken this one to its keeping and it will fly no more. Is that so?"

"It is so, Chief."

The tall Kirghiz smacked his thigh.

"Then here is something I can do for you. I have none of the things that fly, but I have horses, and yaks, camels and men, and these shall be at your service, go where you will. Do you accept?"

"Gladly. And I will not hide from you, Chief, that your offer of help is very welcome."

The Kirghiz laughed.

"Then all is well, White Man," he cried. "You have the help you need and I have my son back again, so are we both satisfied."

CHAPTER VII

In the Camp of the Kirghiz

"Tibet, Sahib!"

Some hours had passed. The stranded flyers had entertained their new friends to breakfast, the two Kirghiz tribesmen had been despatched under the charge of Norbo to fetch horses and pack animals to carry the Englishmen and their goods, and now the Kirghiz chief, whose name was Hora, was seated in earnest conversation with John Hanson and the two boys.

"Tibet." The chief repeated the name as though it caused him surprise, and, while one hand stroked his short thick beard, his eyes darted quick appraising glances from one face to another. "Tibet." Again the strange repetition; then, evidently realizing that his astonishment must appear peculiar to his hearers, the chief entered upon an explanation.

"Your pardon, White Men, but hearing that you travelled to Tibet caused me surprise. I am a wanderer, Sahibs, and the chief of a tribe of wanderers. Now, those who wander hear many things, and one of the things I have heard, Sahibs, is that Tibet is a bad land to visit nowadays."

"Why is it a bad land to visit, Hora?" asked Colin.

The chief turned his head, and looked at the boy.

"I know not, young Sahib, and that is the truth, for I would not lie to you who have done for me what

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you have done; yet I hear whispers. One whisper says that strangers are no longer welcomed in Tibet, and that those who go in come not back."

"Why?"

The question was John Hanson's this time, but the chief shook his head.

"How should I know, Sahib, when those who might reply to that riddle never come back to give the answer? They go and they do not return, and when others go to seek their friends they also come not back, so now none enter that cold and cruel land which would seem to be peopled with devils."

"I see."

For some moments there was silence, which the chief was the first to break.

"Is it true that my friends wish to enter Tibet?" he asked.

"It is."

"May a chief of the Kirghiz, who is their friend, ask, why?"

The boys' uncle nodded.

"He may, Hora, and I will tell him. We belong to a great nation, Chief, a nation so great that it stretches right round the world, and when the sun sinks upon one part of that nation it rises upon another, so that it is called the nation upon which the sun never sets. Now, because our nation is so great and rich there are many who are jealous and would like to break in and steal, and so the men of our nation have always to be on the watch against robbers. Is that clear, Hora?"

"It is clear, Sahib."

"Good. Now, of late we also have heard whispers, and those whispers have come like little breaths of cold wind out of Tibet, and, because the whispers were

not good whispers, certain of our young men went to see what it was which made the little breaths of wind."

"And they also came not back?"

"They also came not back, Chief. Yet wait, I am wrong. One did come back, but he was mad, so mad that he could talk of nothing save a gong. Have you ever heard of a gong, Hora, which sends men mad?"

The Kirghiz shook his head.

"Never, Sahib." For several seconds he sat deep in thought; then he went on. "So my friends wish to enter Tibet to find out why the young men of their nation have not returned, to discover this gong which sends men mad, and to learn if robbers are preparing to break in and steal. Am I right?"

"You are right, Hora. In the thing that flew we could have reached Tibet in an hour, but on the way hither enemies fired at us and bullets hit the thing that flew so that presently she crashed in the desert here, and will fly no more."

The chief looked at the wrecked monoplane.

"A bad place to fall out of the sky, Sahibs," he commented, "though no doubt Allah willed it so that you might save my son and we might meet. But it is a long and hard road to Tibet, White Men."

"A long and hard road which we are determined to tread, nevertheless, Hora," replied John Hanson firmly.

The Kirghiz looked up sharply.

"Say you so, Sahib? Then we will waste no more time in talk such as women use, which goes round in circles and leads nowhere." A doubtful look overspread his swarthy features. "But the Sahibs cannot journey to Tibet dressed as they are. Did they do so the very birds would carry the news that white men

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are on their way, and if the Sahibs are to learn those things they desire to learn, no man who sees them must be able to say, here are strangers."

The boys' uncle laughed!

"Have no fear, Hora," he replied. "I have travelled in many lands, and in each one men have claimed me as their brother. So it shall be with these young men of my family. They speak your language and others, and in an hour from now I wager you will not know them. Do you take the bet?"

"Ho, ho!" laughed the Kirghiz chief. "No, no, White Stranger, I take no bets, for Allah whispers in my ear that I should lose. Still, work your magic, and when you have made the young Sahibs so that they shall pass even as your servant yonder shall pass, then you shall have my son Norbo and a dozen men and horses to help you on your way. Hasten now, Sahib, for it will be well to work this change before others of my tribe appear. My son and those men who came with me will tell no one that they found three white men here, for I bade them keep still tongues, but I cannot control the tongues of a whole tribe, and when tongues begin to wag news spreads, and when news spreads the whole world soon knows."

"That is true, Hora," answered John Hanson; "but how shall we account for the thing that flew and the gear which we have brought with us?"

"Easy, Sahib. You shall say that you came upon the thing that flew yesterday before the bourane started. Of course you looked for the men who had flown her, but they were nowhere to be found, and you were just about to pack the rest of their goods on your horses when the bourane started."

"So far so good, Hora," chuckled Dick, entering

into the ruse. "But what about our horses? Where are they?"

"Alas, young Sahib, where are they? Allah alone knows. Of course you took shelter in the little hut place, and while you were sheltering there your horses wandered away and were lost in the bourane. Then you heard the cry of my son and saved him, and this morning I arrived and found you. And of course, Sahibs, as you were the first to find the thing that flew, she and all she contains belongs to you."

Everyone laughed at the chief's ingenious fabrication.

"Thin, but it will do, Nephews," commented the boys' uncle when the mirth had subsided; "especially as we shall make a present of everything we don't want to our new friends. Now come along and let's disguise ourselves. The chief is right. It would never do for three white men to be found here."

The change did not take as long as might have been expected. Out of his wide experience, John Hanson had provided everything necessary for their complete disguise, and within the promised hour they had stained their skins brown, their hair black, and in place of three white men had appeared a sturdy nomad and his two more youthful companions such as might be found wandering anywhere over that vast country which stretches north of the Himalayas for nearly two thousand miles. When the chief saw them he opened his eyes in amazement.

"By Allah," he cried; "but I am glad I did not take your bet, Sahib," addressing the boys' uncle. "It is a miracle. Had I met you I should never have looked twice, you are so like those I see every day. But, Sahibs, what are your names? You are no longer white Sahibs, and must have names to suit your dress."

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"True, Hora," replied John Hanson. "So my name shall be Sarol, and these young men," pointing first to Colin, "are Kachi and Nattoo, my sons."

"Sarol, Kachi and Nattoo," repeated the Kirghiz chief. "Good, I will remember. And the name of that little dark man over there is Larg. Now, friend Sarol, what is your wish? Will you bide awhile in my tents, or will you go on your way at once?"

"To-night we will bide in your tents, Chief; then to-morrow, if you will lend us men and horses, we will start on our journey," answered the boys' uncle. "Will the passes over the Kunlun be open?"

The chief shook his head.

"Too early, friend. But never fear. We wanderers have our own ways of crossing the mountains, and by these we will take you. Have you in mind, friend, any special place in Tibet to which you wish to go?"

"Zong."

"Zong. Aye, I have heard of Zong. A holy place, they say, though not of my faith. Think you to find the answer to your questions in Zong, friend Sarol?"

John Hanson smiled grimly.

"No, Hora, we shall find no answers in Zong," he replied. "But we hope there to pick up one end of the string which will lead us to the knot we would unravel."

"Ho, ho! I understand. So be it, friends. To Zong my young men shall take you, and may Allah have you in his keeping, for you are brave Sahibs. Now I think I hear Norbo returning, so, my friends, forget that you are Sahibs and that your skins are white, and be four wanderers who have done me a service and whom I wish to repay in kind."

True enough, three minutes later Norbo and half a dozen men leading five spare riding horses and several

pack animals appeared over the top of a sand dune, and came cantering towards the wrecked 'plane. At sight of the change which had taken place in the appearance of the three white strangers, Norbo and the men who had first accompanied the Kirghiz chief to the spot opened their eyes in astonishment, but a few quiet words from Chief Hora explained matters and their astonishment gave place to broad grins.

"All is well," he said, returning to where the four travellers stood in a little group beside the wrecked monoplane. "They have told no one that you are white, so the rest of my tribe need never know the colour of your skins, my friends. Also, I have made known to them the story we arranged, and this Norbo and the others will spread about so that soon it will be known to all. Now, friend Sarol," he went on in a louder voice, "let us tie these treasures to which Allah must surely have led you into bales and strap them to the backs of the pack horses. And when that is done we will return to my camp, and I will feast you as men feast those who have done them service."

Now followed a scene of busy animation, and in a surprisingly short time the Kirghiz tribesmen had the contents of the monoplane securely done up into bales and tied to the backs of the patient pack animals. Then everyone mounted, and the journey across the desert began. John Hanson rode in front with Chief Hora, while Norbo and the two boys and Larg brought up the rear of the procession. The young chieftain had entered into their masquerade with enthusiasm, and when Colin told him that he was to lead the party which was to help them to reach Tibet his eyes glowed with satisfaction.

"Now, indeed, I am glad that I got lost in the bourane, and that you, Kachi and Nattoo and Larg,

saved me," he cried. "Tell me, Kachi, when do we start on our journey?"

Colin grinned.

"To-morrow, Norbo," he replied. "Your father tells us that it will be a hard journey."

"A hard journey. Pouf! Are we not men, and is not all life hard? So to-night we will feast, and to-morrow we will begin our journey. Look, Kachi, look, Nattoo, what do you think of our desert? Yesterday it was a raging devil who cried kill, kill, kill, but to-day it is like a lamb."

The boys looked about them. On all sides of them there was sand, sand scooped out into great furrows or piled into huge ridges three hundred feet in height; a sea of sand in the hollows of which nothing was visible save the burning yellow slopes, while from the summits of the dunes it stretched away into illimitable distance except towards the south where, a few miles away, the foothills of the Altyn Tagh mountains were visible.

"Jove, what a place!" ejaculated Dick. "Makes one thirsty to look at it. Lucky we had the monoplane to shelter us yesterday. Fancy wandering about this in a bourane!"

"I don't think anyone would wander long, at least not unless he knew the ropes," replied Colin. He turned to Norbo, and, speaking the Kirghiz boy's language, went on. "How far is it to the camp of your tribe, Norbo?"

"About four hours' journey, Kachi, travelling with pack animals, though we did it much quicker this morning. See that ridge stretching out into the desert?" The speaker raised an arm and pointed south. "There is a spring beneath that ridge, and my people are camped around it. Presently, when the days get

warmer, the tribe will move up into the mountains and spend the summer on the high plateaux, but at this time of the year it is too cold upon the high ground, so we make our camp near the desert."

During the ride which followed, Colin and Dick received many useful hints from Norbo regarding deportment and behaviour. Evidently the Kirghiz boy was determined to make their masquerade a success, and when at last, towards evening, the cavalcade reached the encampment both boys felt much more at home in their disguise.

The Kirghiz camp presented a busy scene. Long before the travellers reached it they were greeted by a chorus of sound consisting of the wailing of camels, the barking of dogs, the whinnying of mares, the bleating of sheep, the grunting of yaks and the shrill cries of women and children; then, as they drew nearer, they were met by a medley of smells in which the strong choking scent of burning yaks' dung and the hot sweaty smell of hundreds of animals played the predominant parts.

"Pretty pungent, what?" grinned Dick, as they rode in among the large circular tents built of reeds and covered with strips of felt in which the Kirghiz lived.

Colin nodded, and continued to look about him with ever-increasing interest. The place was a hive of life. Children tumbled over each other and played almost beneath the horses' feet, women bent over smouldering smoking fires of yaks' dung cooking the evening meal, men shouted to each other, gossiped and turned to stare at them as they rode past, and everywhere there were animals, animals, animals.

"And rich, too," went on Dick, pursuing his own line of thought. "Look at all those camels; must be

worth a lot. Hulloo, we've arrived. The chief and uncle are stopping. Looks as though that big tent must be the chief's abode."

In this Dick proved to be right, but the three Englishmen and Larg were led to a smaller tent beside the larger, and, which bore the appearance of having been recently erected.

"This is my friends' tent," said the Chief Hora as he led the travellers inside. "I have given orders that their goods shall be brought here. There are carpets on which they may sleep, and presently, when the women have finished their cooking, we will break meat together. Afterwards we will discuss my friends' plans. Perhaps after all they will gladden my heart by being my guests for a few days?"

The boys' uncle shook his head.

"We thank you, Hora, but we must depart tomorrow," he replied firmly. "Already we shall reach Zong many weeks late, and when we get there our quest will have but begun. So ask us not to stay, my friend, lest in our refusal we should prove ungrateful."

The chief smiled.

"That can never be. 'Tis I who risk being ungrateful by doing too little for those who have done so much for me. Therefore we will say no more. Tomorrow, an hour after dawn, there shall be horses and yaks and men to take my friends wherever they would go, and with them there shall be a guide who knows the secret ways across the mountains, and my son Norbo to command his tribesmen under my friends' orders. Now I will leave my friends until it is time to eat."

"Well, that's that," remarked Dick as the chief left the tent. "Norbo certainly seems to have brought us

luck. Heavens! How that sand sticks. Any chance of a dip, Uncle?"

John Hanson laughed.

"A dip, Nephew? No, I fear there is no chance of a dip. Indeed, my advice to both of you is to forego cleanliness as much as possible from this time forth. In the countries to which we go cleanliness is not next to godliness, and the dirtier we are the better will be our disguise. Now I am going to rest till it is time to eat. Look at Larg," pointing to the little Gurkha, who had already curled himself up on a carpet and was fast asleep. "He's an old campaigner, and knows the value of sleep and rest. So follow his example, Nephews, while you may, for there's a time coming when we shall get precious little of either."

Two hours later Norbo came to fetch his new friends to the feast. It was held in the chief's tent, and while the eaters sat on mats round a smoking fire they were served by the women with wooden bowls filled with a mess of sheep's flesh broiled in milk and mixed with rice. It looked an unpalatable dish, nevertheless the boys found it surprisingly good, and to their host's delight they both demolished a second helping before they passed on to the next course of cheese and a dark coloured bread. Finally came great goblets of koumiss—mare's milk fermented in a bag made from the skin of a goat—and the boys were feeling decidedly dizzy about their heads when, finally, they said good night to the chief and Norbo, and retired to their own tent.

"I say, Uncle," asked Colin, as he stretched himself on his carpet, "is there anything alcoholic about that drink they gave us?"

His uncle smiled.

"Well, it has a tendency that way, Nephew," he

replied. "But never mind, you and Dick both did your duty nobly. When a man offers hospitality in the East he expects it to be accepted, and the nomad loves a cheerful feaster. Now go to sleep. You will have forgotten all about the koumiss in the morning."

CHAPTER VIII

Zong

“Behold, Nephews, the ancient and holy monastery of Zong.”

Three weeks had passed since the boys and their uncle had said good-bye to Chief Hora in his encampment among the foothills of the Altyn Tagh. They had been three weeks of grinding toil by day and biting cold by night, cold so terrible that it had struck through to the very bones despite woollen clothing, and blankets, and fires which the Kirghiz escort had kept blazing so long as there was fuel to burn. Crossing the Altyn Tagh had proved hard enough, but no sooner had the travellers left those mountains behind and crossed the border into Tibet than they had plunged into the recesses of the Kunlun Mountains. Even now Colin and Dick found it difficult to understand how they and their companions had come through the ordeal. The horses were sent back, and food and stores for men and beasts had been packed on the backs of six yaks and their own and their companions' shoulders, and then the Kirghiz guide had led them into the mouth of a gorge, a gorge so narrow and so deep that they marched through perpetual twilight unbroken by a single ray of direct sunshine.

That gorge they had followed for two days, mounting higher with almost every mile; then had come glaciers crevassed and broken in all directions, followed by mighty slopes of snow where twice the whole party

had nearly been swept into oblivion by avalanches which had rushed down without warning from the towering heights above. Those nights on the heights! No fires then. Only the hissing primus stoves to give them hot food to keep them warm, and once, when a blizzard had caught them at a point ten thousand feet above sea-level, they had spent a day and a night huddled together in their little tents in the shelter of a wall of ice five hundred feet high, and as the hours passed, and the storm had raged ever fiercer and fiercer, the faces of John Hanson and the Kirghiz tribesmen had grown graver and more grave until even Norbo's broad countenance had lost its habitual cheerfulness.

But morning had brought a lull, and, taking their lives in their hands, the party had rushed down a glacier which had been swept bare by the wind, and had reached a sheltered valley before the hurricane swooped down upon them again. In that valley they had rested two days, after which a spell of fine weather had set in, and now, exactly twenty-one days after parting from Chief Hora, the travellers stood upon a high ridge, and looked south over a jumbled mass of mountains and precipices, gorges and glaciers which seemed to stretch away to the world's end.

Zong! Colin drew a pair of field-glasses from a pocket in his sheepskin coat and focussed them upon a rambling grey building which clung to the side of an immense precipice some twenty miles away. So that was Zong, the place where his uncle hoped to find the beginning of the answer to the riddle they had come all that way to solve. The boy moved his glasses, and searched the surrounding hills and valleys for any other sign of life, but there was none. Colin shivered. The Forbidden Land, some people called Tibet, but

the Forbidding Land seemed the more fitting title. In all their journey from the camp of Chief Hora they had seen no living soul except themselves, and that distant monastery lay like a tiny drop in the middle of a sea of desolation and loneliness. It seemed impossible that amid that barren, inhospitable waste there could lie a threat to India with her teeming millions, and through India at Britain with all the might of her people behind her and her long heritage of inviolability. The boy looked at his uncle as he stood talking to Norbo. His shoulder was completely healed, and the past weeks had converted him into a lean hawk of a man, and Dick and Larg had changed likewise. He supposed the same metamorphosis had taken place in himself, and certainly no one at home seeing them now would recognize in the three dark-skinned, dirty, unkempt scarecrows John Hanson and his nephews. The knowledge gave Colin confidence. The weeks spent with the Kirghiz had taught him and Dick a vast amount, and they had no longer any fear that in ordinary circumstances their disguise would be seen through. As for their uncle, he might have sprung from the soil, and Colin grinned as he listened to his relative talking to Norbo and his fellow tribesmen, and cracking jokes which sent his hearers into roars of laughter, but which would certainly not have passed muster in an English drawing-room.

"Well, Nephews, the quest begins, and, as I have been telling Norbo, the time has come when we must part company. It would never do for a party like this to approach Zong, and from now on we are four homeless wanderers dependent upon our rifles and upon what we carry on our backs. So say farewell to our friends and let us be gone, for we must reach Zong before nightfall."

Partings were soon said. Norbo was distressed at saying good-bye to his friends, but his sorrow was considerably lessened by the present of a wrist-watch and various paper money which he might or might not be able to use, while the distribution of surplus gear for which the travellers no longer had any need, and more paper money among the other Kirghiz who had accompanied them, made of the parting an occasion for smiles and good wishes. Then, with a final wave of their hands, the three Englishmen and Larg turned their backs on their late companions, and in a short time were swinging down a narrow track, carrying with them nothing but a thick blanket apiece, their rifles, pistols, a plentiful supply of ammunition and a sharp knife each, together with a stock of food and a few necessary odds and ends. As John Hanson said, in the future they had to travel light and fast, and the lighter they travelled the faster they would go.

“What sort of reception shall we receive at Zong, Uncle?” asked Dick presently, as they trudged along.

“A good one, I hope, Nephew. The abbot is a friend of mine, for I once did him a service, and I hardly think that the Mongolians, if we are correct in our surmise, will have interested themselves in such a remote monastery as Zong. Still, it is impossible to tell. The Mongolians as a race don’t leave much to chance, and we have yet to account for those men who, according to Chief Hora, entered the country on this side and never came back.”

The speaker lapsed into silence, but both Colin and Dick noticed as they marched along that their uncle and Larg continually scanned the surrounding country with keen eyes, and presently they found themselves doing the same thing. Why this sudden

vigilance? they wondered. Was it because, for the first time for three weeks, they were approaching the haunt of men? Possibly. The country seemed absolutely deserted, however, and, when at last the travellers halted for their midday meal beside a mountain stream, they had seen no living thing except half a dozen mountain goats high up on a steep hillside.

"Any plans, Uncle?" asked Colin, as they munched cold chapati and goat's flesh, washed down by ice-chilled water.

"None. Everything depends upon what the abbot has to tell me. If—— Hullo, Dick, what have you got there?"

For the younger boy had suddenly jumped to his feet, and retrieved something from among a litter of stones by the side of the stream; now he straightened himself, holding between the first finger and thumb of his right hand a small, slender, bright object.

"Cartridge case," he replied tonelessly, holding up the object for the others to see. "Service rifle, by the look of it. New and can't have been lying there long."

"Let me see it!"

John Hanson rapped out the words, and Dick placed the cartridge case in his uncle's outstretched hand.

"H'm!" went on the elder man after he had sniffed at the case and subjected it to a sharp scrutiny. "What do you make of it, Nephew?"

"Well," replied Dick slowly; "I'd say that someone carrying a modern service rifle has been here quite recently, probably within the last twenty-four hours. For some reason he fired his rifle, though why he fired it I can't tell you. Perhaps he was shooting at a mountain goat, perhaps it was a signal. I should

also say that the man wasn't a lama, for lamas don't usually possess modern service rifles, and if he wasn't a lama then he wasn't an inhabitant of Zong, and that leads us to the conclusion that the surrounding country isn't so desolate as it appears to be."

"An uncomfortable conclusion to arrive at, Dick, but one with which I am forced to agree," replied his uncle. The speaker rose to his feet, and gazed searchingly around. "Nephews," he went on; "I confess I don't like it. I had at least counted on reaching Zong undetected, but now——" He shrugged his shoulders. "If anyone saw us saying good-bye to Norbo and his crowd, anyone, that is, who uses this type of cartridge," and he held up the slender cylinder; "then quite probably we are already marked men." He bent suddenly, picked up his rifle and slung his pack across his shoulders. "Come on. We must get to Zong as quickly as we can. We may learn something of what is going on there. It's possible, of course, that that case fell from the stolen rifle of some wandering hillman, but——" What do you think, Larg?"

The Gurkha scratched his head.

"I do not think that cartridge belonged to any hillman, Sahib," he replied after a brief pause. "It is too early in the year for such wanderers to be about, and why should a hillman be here, so far off the beaten track? I think, Sahib"—the little man spoke slowly choosing his words with care—"I think, Sahib, that that cartridge was probably fired as a signal. I think, Sahib, that most likely we are being watched, and I think we should make haste to reach Zong before the men to whom the owner of that cartridge signalled come to stop us."

Two minutes later the little party were on their way. They had travelled about eight miles since they had

parted from Norbo, and there were still twelve miles between themselves and Zong, and all through the afternoon the tall Englishman, who had so miraculously dropped his individuality that now he seemed one with the wild country around them, led the way forward at a swift mile-devouring stride. They traversed narrow rocky valleys where nothing green grew, where snow still lay among the shadows and where the only sounds were their own footfalls and the turbulent rush and roar of some mountain torrent but recently released from its winter sleep. They climbed rock-strewn slopes, made their way along dizzy ledges where a misstep meant crashing on to the rocks a thousand feet below, threaded narrow gorges, plunged down one side of a valley, waded an ice-cold stream and then swarmed up the opposite hillside, until Colin and Dick had lost all sense of direction and could only follow the long lean figure in front.

"How do you know your way, Uncle?" asked Colin at last when they paused for a short breathing-space at the top of a particularly steep slope.

"Been here before," replied the elder man laconically. "Have you seen anything?"

"One eagle and some mountain goats," replied Colin, grinning in spite of his fatigue. "And the goats were resting in the sun, Uncle, and were showing no signs of nervousness."

"Good for you, Colin," replied the elder man, "we'll make a hillman of you yet. Dick, Larg, anything to report?"

But neither of the others had seen any signs of pursuit, so the march was resumed. And now the shadows were growing long, and in the deeper valleys night was already laying its hand upon the cruel, inhospitable land. So at last they came to the top of

a low ridge and stood gazing at a towering wall of rock half a mile away. The valley between was already filled with shadows, but there was sufficient light remaining to show the travellers a long straggling building perched on a wide ledge about five hundred feet up the opposite precipice, and at that distance, save for a faint light here and there, looking as though it was part of the rock itself. A narrow winding path led up to the main gate, and even as the companions watched, the tiny figure of a lama appeared in the opening, and stood gazing across in their direction; then, as though the sight of them caused the watcher alarm, he stepped back, and a minute later the travellers saw the great doors slowly close.

John Hanson laughed.

"Welcome to Zong, Nephews," he cried; "though the holy lamas show more nervousness than when I was here last. But have no fear. I know a word which will open those doors, and the sooner we are behind walls now the better."

So saying, he started off down the valley side into the gathering gloom.

An hour later the travellers were safe inside the monastery. At first the lamas had refused to admit the four fierce-looking strangers, but a whispered word from Sarol and the doors had swung open, and now they were sitting in the refectory of the monastery feeding off goat's meat and tuk-pa, a tasty dish which the boys discovered to consist of macaroni stewed in mutton broth. As they ate, an elderly lama with a cheerful wrinkled face the colour of old mahogany, hovered about them, directing the efforts of two young priests who waited upon the guests, and every now and then exchanging sentences with the boys' uncle in a language which no one but the speakers appeared

to understand. Presently John Hanson leant over and whispered to Colin and Dick. ‘

“He knows nothing. All he can tell me is that there are some strangers in the neighbourhood about whom the abbot has given orders that they are not to be admitted to the monastery, though if the strangers are the people we think they are I can’t understand why they have submitted to being kept out. But we’ll learn more from the abbot. Ah! here comes the summons to his presence,” as a third young priest entered the room. “Now, boys, the abbot will offer you buttered tea. You won’t like it but you must drink it, or the Holy One will be offended.”

Five minutes later the four travellers were seated on carpets before an ancient grey-haired man. The room they were in was bare and stone-walled, dimly lighted by oil lamps and meagrely furnished with carpets and the paraphernalia of their host’s holy office. Evidently the room of an ascetic, Colin concluded as his eyes took in the hard, comfortless surroundings. He looked round as a young, silent-footed priest served him with a china cup containing a concoction of stewed tea mixed with butter and salt; then, as though compelled by some outside power, he raised his head, to find the abbot’s eyes fixed upon him, and with something like a shock the boy suddenly realized the immense force lying within that ancient body. The abbot was at least ninety years old, but the eyes were the eyes of a man in the prime of life and wisdom. So for a second youth and age regarded each other, while it seemed to Colin that the abbot looked into his very soul; the next their host had signed to the young lama to leave the room, and as the door closed behind him the abbot broke the silence for the first time.

“Greeting, Sarol. The last time you were here you bore another name. But what are names? A man’s deeds and purpose are the things which count, and they bear the same weight of good or evil whether his name be Sarol, or Mir Khan, or John Hanson the Englishman.”

A faint smile passed over the face of the boys’ uncle.

“Greeting, Holy One,” he replied. “I have come back as I said I would, and with me I have brought two young men of my house whom I have rechristened Kachi and Nattoo”—he pointed first to Colin and then to Dick—“and my servant Larg, whom you have known before.”

The abbot inclined his head.

“Greeting, Kachi and Nattoo,” he answered, “and greeting, Larg, whom I remember as a man of great faith though of little wisdom. So you have come back, Sarol, but what brings you to Zong? I have looked in Kachi’s eyes and they hold a question. Have you brought me a riddle to which you desire the answer?”

John Hanson nodded.

“We have brought a riddle, Holy One, and the riddle is this. Why do men who enter Tibet no longer return to the land from which they started?”

“Ah!” The abbot bowed his head, and for several seconds he made no answer, and when at length he looked up again it seemed to Colin as though his eyes had lost something of their vigour. “I am an old man, Sarol,” he went on; “and by some am accounted wise; yet you have asked a riddle to which I can give you no real answer. I have heard whispers, for, as you know, we lamas have our own means of obtaining knowledge. But they are merely whispers, though this

I know. Armed evil stalks through the land and holds it in its grip. When you knocked upon the doors of this monastery a short time ago, did you find easy admittance?"

"We did not, and I had to speak the word you gave me before your lamas would let me in."

"You see. Now I can tell you this, Sarol. There is a watch kept upon these hills. Some months ago a man came to Zong, and he had other men with him, and they were armed. And this man said to me: 'I desire quarters for myself and my men at Zong'. But I trusted him not, for he was a Mongolian and his men were men of war. So I refused his request, and bade him go and take his followers with him, and because he was a Buddhist and feared the curse with which I threatened him, he went, and he and his followers made themselves shelters elsewhere. Nevertheless, Sarol, we are prisoners in Zong, and by my orders watch is kept lest this man or any of his followers, losing their fear of my curse, should try to enter the monastery by stratagem and take possession."

"And it is these men and men like them who keep watch upon the hills and hold the land in their power?"

The abbot inclined his head.

"And though they let men into Tibet they let none return?"

"So I hear, my son, and because they let none return I conclude that there is a guilty secret in Tibet which they would hide from the rest of the world."

"But if the Mongolians watch the borders why did they let us in?" asked Dick, speaking for the first time.

The abbot smiled.

"Why not, Nattoo? They have allowed you in,

but that does not mean they will willingly allow you to return."

"Then you think they saw us, Holy One?" persisted the boy.

"I do."

"But, Father," and now it was Colin who spoke; "what is this guilty secret of which you speak?"

"What secret would men of war have, my son, but the secret of a threat to blessed peace. That is my reading of the riddle, Kachi, though as I have already told you it is but a picture in my mind built up of whispers, and is not based on any sure knowledge. The Mongolians plan war, and against whom could they plan war in Tibet if not against India? Would you like to know more of that picture which is in my mind, White Men and Larg? I will tell you. I see the Mongolians secretly entering Tibet in their thousands and tens of thousands. I see them overrun the country till it is a captive land. I see them close the frontiers with an invisible wall of death, and there the picture ends. I am an old man, my sons. I see the plan, but I do not see *how* they plan, though I think that the answer might be found in the south. Do you go south, Sarol?"

"We go south, Holy One."

"Then you are brave men, and my blessing shall go with you, for you go to avert a great disaster. And now——"

• A loud knocking on the door interrupted the abbot, and before he could give permission to enter an elderly lama had rushed into the room.

"Your forgiveness, Holy One," he cried in a voice which trembled with fear while he bowed low before the abbot; "but there are armed men outside the gates of Zong demanding admittance. I think, Holy

One, that they come searching for these strangers here, and they say that if the gates are not opened they will break them down, and they utter many dire threats against those within."

While the lama had been speaking the travellers had stood up, but now as the boys' uncle was about to speak the abbot signed to him to be silent.

"Return to the gates, Lopa," he said, addressing the trembling lama. "Speak to the men outside. Tell them that I have given orders for the gates to be opened, but that the gate-keepers are at prayer, and cannot come for a few minutes. So you shall delay matters, and on the way to the gates you will seek out our young brother, Khapa, and send him to me. Now go, and obey my commands." The lama hurried out of the room, and as he did so the abbot turned to the travellers. "It seems, my friends, that I am not to enjoy your company very long, but for your own sakes I must send you on your way at once, for if the men outside Zong should find you here I fear they may kill you. Khapa, for whom I have sent, is a young and vigorous brother, and will guide your escape by a secret path. Here he is." For half a minute the abbot spoke quickly to a young and brawny Tibetan who had entered the room and bowed before him; then he turned again to the travellers. "Follow Khapa, my friends," he said. "He is faithful, and I have told him to obey you as myself. Hasten now. Time is short, and I cannot delay the violators of Zong much longer. Farewell, and may the All-Wise guide you in your quest."

He waved them away, and the last the boys saw of the Abbot of Zong as they left the room was a venerable figure with a lined and aged face out of which two keen and brilliant eyes stared into space as though

they gazed at some vast and awe-inspiring picture. Involuntarily they shivered. What was he seeing? they wondered. Then the door hid the abbot from view, and they were following Khapa along a narrow, dimly-lighted passage.

CHAPTER .IX

A Night of Peril

A few minutes later the four travellers and Khapa were gathered on the summit of the encircling wall at the back of the monastery. They had retrieved their rifles and belongings, and now they stood gazing across a few feet of black space at the face of the precipice which rose sheer for hundreds of feet until lost in the darkness above.

"Does our way lie down there, Khapa?" asked John Hanson, peering into the narrow gulf between wall and cliff, and into which the Tibetan had just tossed a rope, one end of which he had, previously tied round a jutting stone.

"It lies down there, brother. But do not fear. It looks black as the pit of evil; yet it is but a short distance to the firm ground." The sound of thunderous knocking and loud imperative shouts reached the fugitives and made the young lama start apprehensively. "Hasten, brothers!" he cried. "Soon they will have to open the gates or see them battered down, and if the men outside find you here they will kill you."

It was, indeed, time to go, so without further words the boys' uncle gripped hold of the rope and swung himself over into the darkness. For a few seconds a scraping sound reached the listeners above; then his voice came up to them softly from below.

"It's all right, Nephews. There seems to be a

track of sorts down here. Send down the packs and rifles and then follow. Quick, now!"

Colin wasted no time in obeying, and very soon their packs and weapons, followed by Dick and Larg, had disappeared into the blackness. The knocking and the clamouring had ceased, and the boy guessed that at last the gates had been opened. They must hurry. He looked hastily around. Lights were moving in some courtyard far below, but up there he could see nothing but the dim figure of the lama beside him. What about the rope? If that were found their pursuers would know at once the way they had gone. He snapped out a question.

"Another brother is waiting to remove it as soon as we have departed, young stranger," replied his companion hurriedly. "Quick now, before those evil men start to search the walls."

Colin nodded, and, gripping hold of the rope, swung himself over into space. It was a queer sensation hanging there in the utter blackness; then his uncle's voice reached him telling him to hasten, and he began to slide down the rope. The descent was shorter than he had expected, and in a few seconds he was standing on hard rock, and had felt Dick's hand grip his. He was down; now for their guide. He called out softly, and instantly there came the sound of Khapa sliding down through the darkness, and five seconds later the young Tibetan was standing in their midst and the rope had been whisked up into the blackness above.

"Are my brothers ready?" whispered the young lama the instant he was down. "We must hasten, for the evil men are already searching for you. Follow me now and be silent. Our way leads to the right. There is no danger, so tread without fear, and pre-

sently we shall come to a secure place where we can rest till the moon rises to lighten the difficult part of our path."

As he finished speaking Khapa started silently forward, and the next moment the fugitives were on the move along the narrow track. "It was nervous work stealing thus through the darkness along a path they could not see and between walls of rock and stone they could only feel. At a whispered command from their leader, each fugitive had gripped hold of the clothing of the man in front, and thus, at what to the boys seemed a snail's pace, they proceeded for about a hundred yards, and then Colin, happening to stretch out his right hand, discovered that the wall of the monastery had ended and that in its place was rough living rock.

The discovery gave him a shock. Where were they? The boy looked up. A moment before stars had been visible overhead but now there was not a star to be seen. What had happened? The sky could not have clouded over in so short a time. Then they must be underground, going along a tunnel. He whispered his discovery to Dick in front, and the boy murmured some reply. For another hundred yards they stumbled forward; then from somewhere ahead came a draught of cold air, and a few minutes later the fugitives realized that they were in the open again, though the gloom was still so intense that they could see nothing.

"Let my brothers sit down." The voice of Khapa came out of the darkness. "We must wait here till the moon rises and then we must hurry, for only for a short time will the moon light the path ahead. There is no danger if my brothers will keep still. Now I go back a little way to make sure we are not followed, but before the moon rises I will return."

His voice ceased and was followed by the sound of shuffling footsteps which died away almost immediately, leaving the four companions surrounded by utter darkness and silence so absolute that it could almost be felt.

"Where are we?" asked Dick at last, and though he spoke in a whisper his voice sounded startlingly loud in that black stillness.

"Ask me another, Nephew," replied his uncle in the same hushed tones. "Presumably we're being taken along some private get-away of the monks, though it's the first I've ever heard of it."

"I think we're in some cleft in the cliff behind Zong," put in Colin. "Probably it's invisible from the monastery, and we're waiting for the moon to rise because it's too steep to be negotiated in the darkness."

"H'm! Shouldn't be surprised if you're right, Colin," came in his uncle's voice. "That would account for the speed necessary when the moon does rise. A narrow cleft would only be illuminated a short time." He lapsed into silence for a few seconds; then went on: "We seem to have been right about Tibet, Nephews. Something is being hatched here, and the Mongolians are in it up to the neck, though I still can't swallow your theory of the tunnelling machine, Dick. More likely the Mongolians are arranging some concerted rising of the frontier tribes, during which they hope somehow or other to pour their forces through the passes and down into India."

"Well, whatever they're planning, I wish they'd let us have a night's rest," grumbled Dick. "Jove, but I'm tired!"

"You'd have been more tired three weeks ago, Nephew," laughed John Hanson softly. "Cheer up, you'll soon be hardened to this sort of thing. My

chief regret is that the enemy have discovered us so quickly."

"But they can't know anything about us, Uncle," put in Colin. "They can only have seen us in the distance, and once we're well past their outposts we'll be just like any other four wanderers in Tibet."

"Perhaps. Anyway, I hope you're right, Colin. Hullo! am I imagining things, or is it getting lighter?"

"It is getting lighter, Sahib," replied Larg in a throaty whisper. "Also I hear the monk returning. He seems to be in a hurry, so perhaps the dogs who follow us have smelt out our trail, and there will be a fight after all."

"You bloodthirsty little rascal," laughed his master. "Don't worry. You'll get your fill of fighting before we are through. But he's right, Nephews. The monk is returning, and, as Larg says, he seems to be in a hurry."

By this time the sound of hurrying footsteps was clearly audible, and a few seconds later the figure of the monk appeared, dimly visible in the greying gloom.

"Hasten, brothers!" he cried in an urgent whisper. "We must be gone at once. The evil men have searched the monastery, and now they are upon the walls with torches, and if they discover this path they will assuredly follow. Keep close to me now, and step carefully. The way is steep and rocky, but soon the moon will have risen high enough to aid us."

The light was, indeed, already strong enough for the fugitives to see each other as vague figures, and as Khapa stepped forward they fell into line behind and prepared to follow. It was now evident that they were at the bottom of just such a cleft as Colin had described. On either hand sheer black walls of rock hemmed them into a narrow space not six feet wide,

the bottom of which appeared to consist of a boulder-strewn slope which stretched upwards at an acute angle to a narrow, rapidly, brightening strip of sky high above. Had they got to go up there? It appeared so, for Khapa was already beginning the ascent. Accordingly Colin settled his pack and rifle more firmly on his back and started to follow, but he had not climbed more than a few feet when he looked back.

"'Ware boulders," he murmured in a husky whisper. "Some of them are none too firm, and if anyone sets one of these rocks moving there'll be the dickens to pay."

What a journey that was! The incline was like the roof of a house, and there did not appear to be a smooth foot of space in its entire length. In several places the cleft was entirely blocked by huge boulders wedged between the confining walls, and every time the fugitives came to one of these they had to halt while those in front were laboriously pushed to the top by their companions in the rear. When this had been accomplished, it was the turn of those in front to lie down and give the rest of the party a helping hand, and thus slowly, foot by foot, they climbed up towards that gradually widening strip of sky above.

Had it not been for the moon the ascent would have been impossible, and as it was, before half the distance was accomplished, the climbers were all panting for breath, and when at last Khapa halted upon a narrow space of level ground they dropped gasping upon the cold hard rock.

"Much more of this and I'll be a jelly," croaked Dick, gently feeling what promised to be a huge bruise upon his left thigh. "Heavens, but I'm tired! What are we going to do when we get to the top, Uncle?"

"Wait 'till we get there, Nephew, then I'll tell you," replied the elder man grimly. "But I'm afraid there's an all-night march before us. We've got to throw the chaps behind 'off our trail, or sooner or later we'll have to turn and fight them, with the odds in their favour."

"Then why not fight them here, and have done with it?" asked Colin huskily. "One man could hold this cleft against an army."

"Exactly, and our pursuers would soon discover it and abandon the attempt to follow. Then, while we were lying-up wondering what they were doing, they would work round to our rear, and we should suddenly find that we were caught in our own trap. No, we've got to go while the going's good, Nephews, and if our pursuers fail to discover this path then all the better for us."

The speaker rose to his feet and the grim ascent began again. But by this time the rising moon was shining right down the cleft; moreover, the higher they climbed the easier the ascent seemed to become, and fifteen minutes after the restart they reached the top, and found themselves standing on the edge of a snow-covered plateau bounded on all sides by low hills. Again the fugitives halted to rest, and as he leaned against a rock Colin looked about him. It was a weird scene. The brilliant moonlight, the dazzling whiteness of the snow and the pitch-black shadows thrown by the surrounding rocks and hills gave to the landscape the appearance of belonging to some dead and lifeless world, a delusion which was heightened by the absolute silence. Involuntarily the boy shuddered. What a country! There was not a tree or a bush in sight; on all sides there was nothing but snow and black, naked rock. He glanced back down the cleft

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up which they had climbed. The narrow rift was already filling with shadows again as the moon swung away to one side. That was good; darkness would delay pursuit. He looked at his uncle. The elder man was deep in talk with the Tibetan, who was pointing across the plateau, but now, all at once, the conversation came to an end, and a moment later the march was resumed.

"We're leaving a fine trail behind us."

Ten minutes had passed, ten minutes during which no one had said a word until Dick had suddenly remarked on the long line of footprints which stretched out behind them in the snow.

"We can't help that, Dick," replied the boys' uncle. "I'm still hoping our enemies will not discover that path behind the monastery, but if they do, our sole chance of throwing them off will lie in putting such a distance between ourselves and Zong that they will give up the pursuit."

Again conversation lagged. The boys were too weary to talk, and no one else appeared to have any inclination to speak, and so in silence they trudged across the plateau until, reaching the farther side, they entered a narrow valley between low rocky hills. Colin looked back, half-expecting to see some signs of pursuit, but nothing moved on the snow between them and the opposite cliffs, and a few seconds later a bend in the valley hid the plateau from view.

Now followed hour after hour of nightmarish toil. The moon rose to the zenith and began to sink and still the fugitives toiled on, following narrow valleys, crawling up rugged hillsides and descending mountain slopes so steep that in some places they had to join themselves together with rope, until Colin and Dick seemed to lose all sense of feeling and their aching arms

and legs worked automatically. Every half hour they rested for a few minutes, but the short respites only served to stiffen their muscles, and the sinking moon was approaching the horizon when at last the fugitives came to the beginning of a vast snow slope which curled away in front of them in an immense horse-shoe to a line of black cliffs a mile distant.

As one man the little party came to a halt and stood regarding the huge snowy amphitheatre in silent misgiving. Had they got to go across there? Colin and Dick heard their uncle put a sharp question to their Tibetan guide, but they were too occupied with the dread prospect before them to grasp its meaning or hear the lama's reply. High above them the slope seemed to begin at the foot of a great ice-wall broken into a thousand glimmering towers and pinnacles, while below, a thousand feet below, perhaps, it ended in a sea of shadows amid which a darker line of blackness suggested the presence of an immense rift of unknown depth. Had they really got to go across there? A single slip, and—— Apparently Larg also shared their misgivings, for they could hear the little Gurkha muttering to himself; then their uncle raised his voice, and this time they heard what he was saying.

“Khapa says there is no danger if we cross before the sun rises, so we had better start at once while we have the moon to light the way. We'll rope ourselves together, and for Heaven's sake be careful how you tread! Are you all ready? Very well then, come along, and let every man watch that he keeps the rope slack between himself and the man in front, or someone will be pulling somebody else off his balance. Ready? March.”

The passage of that snow slope was the culminating

horror of that dreadful night. Speed was impossible. In front went Khapa; then followed John Hanson, Colin and Dick, with Larg, bringing up the rear, and in that order they shuffled slowly forward, dreading every moment lest a careless step might start one of their number slipping, and perhaps precipitate the whole party into the unseen gulf below. They dared not hurry, and after one glance at the long gleaming slope stretching away beneath them until lost in the treacherous darkness, Colin and Dick kept their eyes fixed straight in front of them. And now the night was no longer silent. Sharp crackling sounds like the reports of distant firearms came down to them from the ice ramparts above, and presently the fugitives became aware of a low distant roar which seemed to rise and fall, and which appeared to come from some place immeasurably far beneath them in the very bowels of the earth.

Water! At the bottom of a deep gorge, far, far down amid the shadows which hid the end of that perilous slope a mountain torrent, swollen with melting snow, was roaring on its way. Where? Colin could not resist a shuddering impulse to cast another look down that hazardous incline of snow, and with a shock he saw that the shadows were much nearer to them than they had been when last he looked. Nearer! Why? But, of course, the moon was sinking, and with every minute, as it fell lower towards those distant bastions of rock, the shadow of the earth was creeping up the slope towards them like a stalking beast of prey. The boy shook himself. Heavens! how imagination played tricks with a fellow amid such surroundings. He spoke to his uncle, telling him of the approaching darkness, and the elder man nodded his head.

"I know, Nephew," he replied, "but we'll do it

in time. Don't look down, look straight ahead, that's my advice."

Again silence fell upon the party. They were two-thirds of the way across and no one had slipped, but the shadows were very near. To Colin's overwrought senses the roar of the distant river seemed to have taken on a hungry note like that of some fierce animal witnessing the escape of its victim. Plod, plod. Automatically almost, the boy lifted his feet and placed them in the footprints of his uncle in front, just as Dick and Larg behind put their feet where he had trod. Plod, plod. Dazedly Colin wondered if the legs of his companions seemed to them to be made of the same leaden material as weighed his own limbs and made every step an effort. Plod, plod. Would they go on after they had crossed the snow slope? How far could one go before one's legs refused to carry their owner any farther? Hullo! the snow seemed to be getting shallower, and Khapa was moving faster. What was this shadow in front? There were still ten yards of gleaming snow between themselves and the creeping darkness from below, but this—— With an effort Colin lifted his weary head, and saw before him a high beetling cliff. Jove! they were across. Yes, they were across, and there was firm safe rock beneath his feet. He hurried forward, jerking with the rope at Dick behind, and two minutes later the fugitives were gathered in a deep recess in the shelter of a jutting rock, and with fumbling fingers were loosening the knots in the rope which had held them together. John Hanson lowered his pack to the ground.

"That's all to-night, Nephews," he said, and even his usually firm voice shook with weariness. "Spread your blankets and go to sleep. Here, stand up, Dick," as the younger boy prepared to lie down on the hard

ground just as he was. "Wrap yourself in your blanket or you'll freeze. That's right."

Colin fumbled at his pack. Something in his mind whispered that someone ought to keep watch against pursuit, but he had no power to put it into words. He pulled his blanket round him and lay down. The rock was hard and cold, but no feather bed had ever been more welcome; the next moment his head touched the ground, and an instant later he was fast asleep.

CHAPTER X

The Shadow Darkens

"Wake up, Colin!"

"Wake up, Sahib Dick!"

Colin and Dick were conscious of hands which shook them and of urgent voices bidding them open their eyes. The voices and the shakings seemed to come from far away, and for some seconds their unconscious selves strenuously resisted the efforts to arouse them; then, as the disturbers of their slumbers redoubled their efforts, they lazily opened their eyes and looked about them. "

"What's the matter?" asked Colin, awakening to the fact that it was broad day, and that his uncle was bending over him.

"Heavens! Colin, I thought I was never going to wake you," growled the elder man. "You and Dick have been sleeping like the dead."

"Well, why not, Uncle? We did enough yesterday to make us sleep for a week."

"That's why not, boy. Twenty good reasons."

The speaker flung out an arm, and with the action full memory of the previous night's happenings rushed back into the boy's mind, and rolling over he gazed out across the great snow slope. In the sunlight its dangers were more plainly visible. The towering pinnacles of ice high above and the gaping chasm at the edge of which the snow slope ended far below

took on a more sinister significance; then, as his eyes became accustomed to the glare, he made out a line of dark figures about three-quarters of a mile away, and working their way cautiously towards them across the glittering snow. For an instant Colin stared at them in silence; the next he was on his feet and reaching for his rifle.

"Mongolians?" he gasped.

"Guess so," replied the elder man. "Our pursuers in hot pursuit. Hulloo, Dick," as the younger boy struggled stiffly to his feet. "Awake at last. Larg was beginning to get quite anxious about you. Get your rifle now. There's work before us. If those fellows over there ever get to handgrips our numbers will be up, so we must keep them at a distance."

As he spoke he drew back the bolt of his rifle and shot a cartridge into the breech, and three minutes later the four defenders were lying hidden among the rocks, with the Tibetan monk squatting on the ground behind them and grasping a villainous-looking knife which he had produced from somewhere among his clothes.

"A thousand yards," said Colin, setting his back-sight accordingly. "That right, Larg?"

"About that, young Sahib."

"What shall we do, Uncle?" went on the boy.

"Fire a shot across their bows to tell 'em to go back."

"I think so, though I fear we are fools. If they do go back, they will only wait till we have gone on, to follow. Still, I don't feel like shooting them down without warning. Aim at the snow around them. Ready? Right-o! Let them have it."

The rifles went off at practically the same moment, and an instant later the defenders saw four puffs of snow rise from the slope close to the approaching

Mongolians. Immediately the advance stopped, and the fugitives could see their enemies staring in their direction. Some appeared to be examining the rocks among which the defenders lay, others started to slip their rifles from their shoulders; then some officer must have given an order, for suddenly the Mongolians spread out on either side and, dropping flat in the snow, continued their advance on all fours.

"Well, that settles it," exclaimed the boys' uncle, staring at the now barely visible black dots spread out across the snowy expanse. "Let them have it, boys. They're brave men, I know, but remember why we're here, and remember also that if once they get across that slope they'll show us no mercy. It's their lives or ours, and don't forget that our lives may be all that stands between peace and a great disaster."

Heartening words. Colin and Dick were glad to hear them, for it is not pleasant aiming the first shot at living men, but now as their uncle's and Larg's rifles rang out, and the snow spurted up close to two of the crawling dots, their doubts vanished. Colin snuggled his cheek against the stock of his rifle and squinted along the sights. What if he did hate the thing he was going to do, was he to let his own personal feelings stand before his duty to his country? Carefully he sighted upon a distant black speck on the glittering slope; then as the muzzle of his rifle ceased to waver, and became as steady as a rock, he slowly pulled the trigger.

Crack! A spurt of snow sprang up some yards behind the man at whom he had aimed. Too high. He pulled back the bolt, ejected the spent cartridge, and shot another into the breach. On his right Dick's rifle went off. Also too high. Their uncle and Larg were firing rapidly. Colin fired again, and again missed.

It was no easy matter aiming at those tiny black dots upon the glittering snow, but the next moment a bullet from Larg's rifle found its mark, and they saw one of their attackers roll over and begin to slide down the snow slope with ever-increasing speed.

"Lord! he'll go 'over the edge into that gorge," gasped Dick.

"Don't look!" snapped Colin. "Remember what uncle said. Why we're here, and what we stand for. They'd do the same to us without turning a hair, and for not half such a good cause."

Again the elder boy fired, and this time his man stopped moving suddenly and lay spread-eagled upon the snow in a silly helpless-looking fashion. Colin was surprised to find how calmly he took it. He had shot a man and he didn't feel sick. The next moment another Mongolian went sliding down the slope, and an instant after a man Dick had aimed at sat up suddenly and began doing something to one of his legs.

Four. Four out of twenty. The defenders were firing rapidly and puffs of snow were springing up all round the advancing men, and now the Mongolians, finding themselves getting the worst of the fight, began to fire back.

"Keep under cover!" ordered the boys' uncle as the bullets began to smack upon the rocks around them.

Colin heard one hit the rock behind which he was sheltering, and ricochet off into space. That was a near one. He looked at Dick. The younger boy was aiming between two rocks, and as he pulled the trigger another of the Mongolians sprang convulsively to his feet and the next moment was rolling rapidly down the slope towards the chasm below. Good shot! Colin fired again, but this time his bullet went wide,

for now the Mongolians were maintaining a rapid fire, half of them advancing while the other half covered their companions with their rifles, and it was not so easy to take aim with the bullets whizzing all around. So passed ten minutes. Two more of the enemy had been hit, making a total of seven, while so far the defenders were unhurt, but now the Mongolians were less than five hundred yards away, and were drawing nearer every moment.

Crack! Dick had fired at a man who for an instant had raised his head, but he had missed; the next moment, however, before the Mongolian could seek shelter in the snow, a bullet from Larg's rifle had caught him, and sent him hurtling down the slope. Eight. Colin fired again and secured another hit, and immediately afterwards the boys' uncle dropped another of the enemy who had foolhardily tried to rise to his feet and run forward. Ten. Half the enemy's force wiped out, but by this time the five hundred yards had been reduced to three hundred, and there were still ten Mongolians to be accounted for.

Ten. Colin wondered what would happen when the enemy rushed. But they wouldn't rush yet, they would wait till they were nearer. He saw Dick crouching behind his boulder while bullets flattened themselves on the rocks all around him, and then, out of the corners of his eyes, he caught a glimpse of Larg drawing his kukri and laying it carefully on the ground beside him. So he was getting ready for the rush. Colin thrust another clip of cartridges into the magazine of his rifle, and shot home the bolt. The Mongolians must never make that rush, they must never be allowed to get near enough. In front of him a moving shadow drew his attention, and he fired, and a man sprang up and fell backwards. Eleven. He heard his uncle

shout encouragement. Then Larg fired, followed in quick succession by John Hanson and Dick, and another of the enemy began to slide helplessly down the slope. Twelve. Only eight left. But what was that new sound? It came from above, a rushing, roaring sound which gathered in volume every moment. Others had heard it, and suddenly, out on the snow slope two hundred yards away, eight Mongolians sprang to their feet and, throwing aside their rifles, came stumbling in queer ungainly strides towards the rock buttress in the shelter of which the defenders lay. The men's faces were convulsed with fear, and they waved their arms and uttered strange inarticulate cries; the next moment an ear-splitting crash was added to the tumult, followed by a shrill screaming, as though every hurricane under Heaven had been let loose, and a roaring cacophony of sound which rose and rose until the very earth shook, and it seemed as if the mountain on which they stood was being split asunder. What was happening? Colin and Dick started to struggle to their feet, but they were still on their knees when their staring eyes caught sight of an immense mass of ice hurtling down the slope at appalling speed. Down it came, splintering into ten thousand pieces as it struck the solid rock, and driving before it an ever-increasing wave of snow. An instant later, with a sound which beggars description, the mighty mass of destruction swept past within thirty yards of the spot where the defenders lay, carrying their surviving enemies and everything in its path straight into the gaping jaws of the black rift which waited to receive it far below. Aghast, the five companions watched the appalling sight; then, as the avalanche disappeared from view in the black maw of the gorge, the shrieking echoes slowly died away.

and silence once again settled upon the scene. John Hanson was the first to speak, and when he did his voice shook.

"I was waiting for that," he said. "I thought the rifle-fire would start a snow-slide, but I never expected the most frightful avalanche I have ever seen."

Half an hour later the travellers were on their way again. They had broken their fast on food brought with them, and now their object was a monastery some twenty miles away, where Khapa thought they might find help and sustenance. They marched in silence, for the recent events were still vivid in their minds, and though Colin and Dick realized that the avalanche had done them a service in destroying all those enemies who knew of their presence in Tibet, they could not forget the sight of those eight terror-stricken men vainly struggling to reach safety.

What an end! More than once they caught each other glancing nervously at the glittering heights above them, and grinned shamefacedly, but though in the course of the morning they saw two more avalanches they were far away and the roar of their falling reached the travellers as faint echoes of sound. Noon came, and after a short halt they started forward again. Now their route lay through desolate valleys and deep gorges, while all around them and above was a land of black rock and glittering snow, of soaring, dazzling peaks and stupendous precipices, a land terrible in its stark grandeur, and where the only living things seemed to be the birds and an occasional lizard basking on some sun-warmed rock.

"What are the plans now, Uncle?" asked Colin presently. "We didn't learn much at Zong. Seems to me that the only thing we can do is to keep on south until we pick up some definite news. The country

will get more populous presently, and then we are bound to hear something."

"That is my hope, Colin," replied the elder man; "but I am also hoping to learn something at this monastery to which we are going. According to Khapa its monks are more in touch with the outside world than the lamas of Zong, and I shall ask the abbot to furnish us with a guide so that Khapa may return home."

The speaker lapsed into silence, and no one showed any inclination to continue the conversation. The exertions of the past twenty-four hours were still so near that even to talk seemed an unnecessary waste of strength, and hour after hour they plodded on with only an occasional word now and then to break the silence. So passed the afternoon, and the sun was already nearing the summits of the western mountains when Khapa at last halted. The travellers were in a broad stony valley, and raising an arm, the young lama pointed ahead to where the valley made an abrupt turn to the south about half a mile away.

"The home of the holy lamas is just round that bend, Sarol," he said, speaking for the first time for some hours. "The keeper of the gate is the son of my father's brother, and when he sees me he will admit us."

He dropped his arm and without waiting for any reply started forward again. Rest, and shelter, and warm food. The very thought that such things were so near sent new strength flowing through the travellers' weary limbs, and unconsciously Colin and Dick jerked their packs higher on to their shoulders and stepped out with a brisker tread. Now they were rounding the bend, and in front of them the valley flattened, and the walls of a long low building appeared in the

dwindling light. Khapa hastened his pace; then all at once he stopped and stood regarding the buildings ahead with a queer questioning look in his eyes. What was wrong? His companions gathered round him and stood staring at the monastery. No one moved near the great building, no lights shone anywhere, and over everything there was a lurking air of desolation and death. What had happened? Suddenly Khapa uttered a hoarse cry and began to run forward, but it was Dick who supplied the answer to the mystery.

"Fire!" he suddenly exclaimed. "The place has been gutted by fire. Look, you can see the marks of the flames on the walls and round the windows. And what's happened to the gate? There's no gate, only an opening between two posts."

A few minutes later the travellers were standing inside the shell of what must not so long ago have been a large and flourishing monastery. Nothing remained except the stone walls, and everywhere there were signs of the holocaust which had swept through the halls and corridors. The ground was littered with ashes and charred beams, and here and there still more grizzly relics were visible among the debris which rose in choking clouds of white dust as the travellers moved from room to room. And over everything there lay a chill dead silence, a silence which was only broken by the sound of John Hanson swearing softly beneath his breath, and low fierce mutterings from Larg and Khapa as they called down, strange and terrible curses upon the heads of those who had perpetrated the foul deed.

"It was a massacre," whispered Dick, as he and Colin stood in a room beneath the high window of which a pitiful heap of human bones told of a vain attempt to escape the fiery death. "Look." The

younger boy pointed to places where the walls were chipped and scarred. • "Bullet marks. And look at this." He drew Colin's attention to a charred skull, the forehead of which contained a small round hole. "Shot through the head. Jove, Colin, what swine! The Mongolians must have done it, but why?"

Colin shrugged his shoulders.

"Who knows? Come on, Dick, let's get out of this, it makes me feel sick."

He followed his brother into the open air, and together they turned and looked back at the blackened shell of death.

"It makes one think, Dick, doesn't it?" murmured Colin presently. "What we're up against, I mean. Heavens, but I'm glad that avalanche swept those brutes to destruction!"

CHAPTER XI

The Place of Question

The travellers spent that night in a small outhouse which, though belonging to the monastery, had escaped the fire. Larg and Khapa gathered a pile of brushwood—there are no trees in Tibet and the tallest growth rarely exceeds a foot in height—and of this they made a small fire over which they boiled some scalding hot tea to wash down their stale, unappetizing food. Everyone sat glumly silent during the meal, for the tragedy of their surroundings did not encourage speech, but when they had finished, and before they settled down to sleep, John Hanson spoke to Khapa.

"Your duty to us ends here, Khapa," he said; "so to-morrow you may return to Zong, and you shall give the Holy One a message from me saying that you have served us well."

Khapa looked up, and as he did so his face took on a fixed obstinate expression.

"I do not wish to return to Zong," he replied.

"You don't wish to return to Zong!" exclaimed the other in surprise. "What do you mean? Do you want to remain with us?"

"Yes, Sarol."

"But why?"

"Why?" The word was almost a scream, and to the watching boys it seemed for a moment as though the dull eyes of the young monk were alight with lambent fire. "Why? You ask me why, Sarol? Look

around you; that is why. Do you think that because I am a man of peace I cannot hate those who make war? Those murdered ones were my brethren. They followed the path as I try to follow it, and now they have been cut off in the midst of their strivings by these devils from beyond the hills. And is it not right that a man should fight devils? Hearken, Sarol. Who you are or why you and your companions are here, I do not know, neither do I ask. But there are two things I know. I know that you are the enemies of the devils, for I saw you shoot them upon the snow slope this morning, and I know, for I am a man with a brain and can think, that you are here for some great purpose for which, did they get you in their power, the devils would kill you. So I say to you, Sarol, let me come with you. As a guide I may be of little use, but even a humble lama has power, and you and those with you, Sarol, will need all the power you can lay hold upon if you are to get the better of the devils who did this deed."

"H'm!" For several seconds John Hanson sat regarding the stalwart young lama by the fitful light of the small fire; then he turned to Colin. "Well, Nephew," he went on; "you have heard Khapa's words. As a member of the expedition, what is your verdict?"

"I say, take him with us," replied Colin in English. "A lama may prove very useful in getting information, as well as in securing food and shelter for us in any monasteries we may happen to pass. Also he certainly hates the Mongolians."

"True. That's one for the 'ayes' then. And you, Dick?"

"Same as Colin, Uncle. The 'ayes' have it with me."

"Two. 'Well, Larg, what is your opinion?"

"Let him come, Sahib. Although a monk, Khapa is a man, and that long knife of his may come in very useful one day."

"Three. The 'ayes' have it. Very well, Khapa comes with us." The speaker turned and conveyed the information to the young monk in his own language. "But remember this, Khapa," he went on. "If ever you betray us or prove false to us in any way, you will die, and not even the Holy One of Zong himself will be able to save you from our vengeance."

Khapa nodded his head.

"I am content, Sarol," he replied. "If I betray you or prove false, then you shall kill me, and if I do either of these things then may my spirit sink lower and lower through the incarnations to come, till I have atoned for my sin, and the All-Wise shall give me permission to rise again. Are you satisfied?"

"I am satisfied, Khapa," answered John Hanson gravely. "Now let us sleep, for sleep is strength to men such as we."

That night everyone slept soundly despite their surroundings, and early the next morning they were on their way again, following a southerly course so far as their wild surroundings would allow. Breakfast had been an unsatisfactory affair, for supplies were running very short, and as they marched along the travellers kept a sharp look-out for burrhel, as the Tibetan mountain sheep are called, and also for more dangerous creatures in the shape of the men who had wrought that foul deed of destruction behind them. Were they still in the neighbourhood? Colin wondered. He doubted it. There had been no vestige of heat remaining among the piled up ashes, and weeks, perhaps months, might have elapsed since death had

come to that lonely valley. But why had the monastery been destroyed? What had the lamas done to bring that terrible vengeance upon them? Certainly the Mongolians held the country in an iron grip, and the travellers could expect no mercy if their real identity was discovered. Suppose——

Colin's thoughts were brought to an abrupt conclusion by a sudden jolt, and he found that he had bumped into Dick, who was marching just in front.

"Sorry," he said. Then, realizing that the party had halted, he went on: "Hullo! what's up? Why have we stopped?"

"Hush! Don't talk so loudly, sound carries. Look, up there on our left. Burrhel. Uncle and Larg are going to try to bag one."

Colin's eyes followed the direction indicated, and far up on a rocky hillside, about eight hundred yards away, he saw a little family of mountain sheep. The leader was a big ram, and the sheep were moving slowly along as they cropped the coarse herbage.

"Long shot," remarked Colin, measuring the distance with his eyes.

"I know, but we've got to get some grub, and there's no cover for stalking them. Uncle's been talking to Khapa, but he knows of no monasteries or villages hereabouts, so it looks like being burrhel or nothing. Quiet now. They're going to shoot."

Meanwhile the boys' uncle and Larg had stretched themselves on the ground, and resting their rifles on convenient boulders were squinting along the sights at the distant sheep. To the hungry watchers they seemed to take a long time over aiming, but suddenly the fingers on the triggers tensed, and the next moment two sharp reports, following almost instantaneously one upon the other, broke the silence. Luck, however,

was not with the marksmen, for in the same instant as they fired the distant sheep moved abruptly forward, and a second later the watchers had the chagrin of seeing their quarry bounding away out of harm's reach.

"D—n!" John Hanson rose to his feet. "Sorry, Nephews, it looks as though we shall have to be content with short commons to-day after all. That is what comes of being too careful. A second earlier and we might have been feasting on burrhel this evening, though I have no doubt Khapa would tell you that the gods of nature were simply looking after their own. Still, it's all in the day's work. So, forward! The sooner we reach more inhabited regions, the quicker will our wants be supplied."

That day, however, there came no change in the wild country through which they passed. No more burrhel came within rifle-shot, nor did the travellers see any signs of human beings or human habitations, and night found them half-way across an immense glacier which poured down through a rift in the mountains like some huge frozen snake. The passage had taken them longer than they had expected, for the glacier was badly crevassed, and now, as the shadows of night came leaping towards them, the boys and their companions gazed anxiously around.

"Looks as though we'll have to camp here," remarked Colin, viewing the broken piled-up ice in front of them. "Too risky going on, eh, Uncle?"

The elder man nodded.

"Fear so. We'd better go back to that litter of rock we passed a short time ago. We'll camp there. Not the softest of beds, but less cold than the ice."

The place in question was reached in safety. It was a litter of boulders which had been brought down

by the glacier, and, choosing the most sheltered spot, the travellers prepared to pass the night as best they could. The remaining food was divided into five portions, and as soon as that was eaten the five companions wrapped themselves in their blankets and lay down on the hard rock as close as they could possibly get to each other for warmth. Very soon Khapa, John Hanson and Larg were asleep. Native of the soil and old campaigners, such hardships were simply recurrences of similar hardships met many times before, but to Colin and Dick that night spent on the bosom of the glacier was fraught with weird and sometimes terrifying experiences, and it was many hours before either of the boys could get to sleep.

For a long time they lay on their backs gazing up at the vast purple arch above, and trying to forget their hunger in watching the stars which, in that clear, rarefied air, shone with an almost unearthly brilliance and seemed to be larger than any stars they had ever seen before. Then gradually, as the heat left over from the sun evaporated into space, the night became filled with strange intermittent sounds and incomprehensible mutterings. For a short time a brittle silence would hang over everything; then all at once a sharp report like a rifle-shot would ring out, to be followed, perhaps, by a splintering crash from somewhere along the sides of the glacier as an immense boulder, loosened by the cold and by the water freezing in its crevices, would suddenly be dislodged from the place where it had rested for centuries and fall down upon the ice.

On top of these came other sounds, shrill whistlings and heart-shaking moans occasioned by the night breeze blowing among the ice spires and into the caverns of the glacier, while from the ice beneath the

travellers' bodies came vague discordant mutterings and agonized groans as the huge frozen monster on which they lay wrenched and writhed its slow way over the uneven bed of rock beneath.

So for a long time the boys lay listening to the sounds of a glacier at night, and wondering uneasily if the next moment might not bring a rending of the ice beneath them, followed by a swift fall to death in the blue, gaping maw of a new crevasse; yet not liking to wake their uncle and ask if the camp was safe. Then, as nothing happened, confidence slowly returned, and presently weary nature proved stronger than strange surroundings, cold and hunger, and the boys fell into a sound sleep from which they did not wake until the sun, shining into their eyes, aroused them the next morning.

Once the travellers were awake there was little delay in starting. Indeed, hunger made it imperative that they should reach some place where they could obtain food as soon as possible. In the morning light the rest of the glacier was crossed in quick time, and within two hours the five companions were striding along a narrow track which presently brought them to the brink of a broad valley. There they halted to look about them. The track they were on led down the hillside and presently joined another and broader track running along the bottom of the valley, and as the boys and their uncle followed this track with their glasses they presently picked up the grey walls of a monastery nestling in the shadow of the hills. It was a small place, and at that distance they could see no sign of life about it, but at least it held out promise of food, and in a short time they were on their way again, anxious now to reach the monastery as soon as they were able.

“Looks a gloomy sort of place, I must say.”

The words were Colin's. Two hours had passed, and the five travellers were now sheltering behind a pile of large boulders, the while they examined the monastery half a mile away. It may have been undue caution which had prompted this mode of approach, but their experiences of the past forty-eight hours had made them suspicious. Not that there was anything outwardly wrong about the monastery. It was smaller than most Tibetan monasteries, though that was nothing to its discredit, and certainly it had not been the scene of any outrage such as had overtaken the last monastery they had slept in. Nevertheless, there was something queer about it. Twice they had noticed men dressed as lamas moving about its precincts, but there was none of the busy life usually found round a Tibetan monastery at midday. To John Hanson, who had seen many such places, the monastery bore a guarded look, though whether those within were on guard against enemies without, as might well be the case, or whether they were waiting for someone outside to walk into their trap, it was impossible to say. He shifted his glasses to another part of the building; then, at the sound of an exclamation from Dick, he swung round, to find Khapa gazing at the distant building with a look suspiciously like terror in his eyes.

“Chap looks as though he's seen a ghost,” said Dick, noticing his uncle's movement. “What's up, Khapa? Do you know the place?”

“I cannot tell, Nattoo,” replied the young lama, keeping his eyes fixed on the grey building. “I have never seen it before, and at first I thought it was strange to me, but now I recall things I have heard, and the more I remember the more I think that the place yonder is the place about which they spoke.”

"They!" snapped John Hanson, speaking for the first time. "What do you mean, Khapa? Who are they?"

"Wise Ones, Sarol. Old lamas who taught me when I was young. They warned me against a place like this, a place to which lamas who do wrong are taken so that they may be questioned on their wrongdoing, and the place they spoke about was called the Place of Question. That is all I know, Sarol. I do not even know how they are questioned, for only the very evil are brought here, and——"

"Then none of us need have any fear," interrupted the boys' uncle heartily. "Pluck up heart, man. Even if that is the Place of Question of which you were told, how does it affect us? We have done no harm to your people, and the lamas who watch over yonder building must at least eat to live, and will have food for famished wanderers. Still, there is no harm in being careful, things being as they are," he went on, breaking into English, and speaking to the boys; "so I am going forward first alone. If I find all well I'll wave to you and you can follow, but if I don't wave, or if I'm not back by sunset, tighten your belts and seek food elsewhere, for the Place of Question will not be so innocent as it tries to look."

"But, Uncle, you mustn't!" both boys exclaimed at once, while Larg uttered a cry of dismay. Then Colin signed to the others to be silent, and went on alone. "Look here, Uncle, that's an absolutely ridiculous suggestion, your going on ahead by yourself, I mean. I quite agree that after what we've seen we must be careful, so I propose that you and I go in front; then, if all is well, we'll signal to the others, while if things aren't quite as they should be, well, there will be two rifles instead of one to help us out."

"No!" John Hanson snapped out the word. "I'm in command of this party, Golin, and in this matter I am going to be obeyed. If anything should happen to me over there, you, Dick and Larg will have to carry on with our task without me. That's my command. But why all this emotion? Why should anything happen to me? Even if that building is the Place of Question Khapa talks about, it doesn't affect us, so—— Hullo!" as the young lama grasped hold of him by one arm. "Yes, Khapa, what do you want?"

"I will go with you, Sarol," replied the monk. "I do not understand your words, but I see by the faces of Kachi and Nattoo that you are saying you will go to the Place of Question alone. But that will not do, Sarol, so we will go together. I am not afraid, for I have done no evil, and if I am with you those yonder will receive you in a more friendly fashion. That is true, is it not? You are a fierce-looking man, Sarol, with your rifle and your long knife, and I do not think that fierce-looking men can be loved by my brethren these days."

John Hanson smiled.

"Too true, I should say," he replied. "Very well, Khapa, you shall come with me. Now," to the boys, "does that satisfy you? Not quite. Well, I'm sorry, but I fear it will have to. Now listen. Khapa and I are going to start at once. If all is well, I'll wave, but on no account are you to show yourselves outside these rocks until I give the signal. Is that clear? Good! Then we'll be off. And for Heaven's sake don't look so glum, you three. You'll be eating your fill within the hour."

He beckoned to Khapa, and together they set off along the winding track towards the monastery, and fifteen minutes later the watchers saw them disappear

inside the gloomy building. Then began a time of anxious waiting for Colin, Dick and Larg. Thirty minutes passed, an hour, two hours, three, and those who had gone ahead had not reappeared, no welcome signal had been made to those watching from among the rocks. What had happened? Were the Mongolians in possession of the monastery? They could see no armed men, and yet— A hundred questions the boys asked each other, a hundred times they suggested marching up to the gate of the monastery and demanding the release of their friends, and each time Larg checked their impetuosity with the one word, "Wait".

"But why wait, Larg?" asked Dick impatiently. "We don't know what may be happening to Uncle and Khapa up there, and every time we suggest going to find out, you say, 'wait'. Why?"

"Did not the Uncle Sahib bid us wait, Sahib Dick?" the little man replied. "Did he not order us to wait till sunset, and then, if he had not returned, we were to tighten our belts, and carry on with the task without him. Did he not say that?"

"He did, but you don't imagine we're going off and leaving him in the lurch, do you?" replied the boy scornfully.

"No, Sahib Dick, I do not, and neither do I, who have never disobeyed my Sahib before, intend to leave him to the mercy of the dogs who may have laid hands upon him. But, Sahib Dick, there are but three of us, and if our enemies have indeed made my master prisoner we shall not help him by being made prisoners also, or being shot, as is more likely, for we should shoot before we let ourselves be taken. That's why I say, 'wait, Sahib Dick. Wait till it is dark, for in the darkness three men may be mistaken for thirty, or else we may creep up unseen and rescue my sahib

before his captors know that we have taken him away."

"H'm! Still, I——"

"Shut up, Dick!" The interruption came from Colin. "Larg's right. He knows more about this sort of thing than we've ever dreamt of, and we can't do anything while it's light and the men in the monastery can see us coming and prepare for our reception. I know it's hard doing nothing, but there it is, so we must make the best of it."

But making the best of it was an arduous and anxious business. Slowly the afternoon passed, and the boys never took their eyes off the distant monastery, hoping against hope that the welcome signal might still come, while Larg sat like a graven image sharpening the edge of his kukri with a stone he carried for the purpose, until it was so keen that he could shave the hairs on his arm. Gradually the shadows lengthened. The sun sank towards the distant mountains and darkness began to fill the valley, and by this time the anxiety of the watchers had become so acute that it almost made them forget their gnawing hunger, and the fact that they had eaten nothing since the night before. In the monastery a light appeared. Near objects began to lose their shape and become vague shadows in the gloom. The vault of sky turned purple and stars shone forth, and at last, when the three companions could no longer see the winding track along the valley, Colin rose to his feet and picked up his rifle from the rock on which it had been lying.

"We can start now, Larg," he said. "What we do must depend——"

He stopped speaking suddenly, and in the hushed silence which followed the three companions stood motionless as though carved in stone. For a sound had come to them across the valley, a clangorous

booming sound, faint but clear and oddly menacing in that desolate place. With bated breath they waited for its repetition, while Dick unconsciously counted the seconds. Fifteen he counted, twenty, twenty-five, thirty. Half a minute passed, and then out of the stillness the sound came again, cruelly clear upon the freezing air. It was the clangour of a gong.

CHAPTER XII

The Gong

Half a minute later the rescuers were on their way, hastening along the track leading to the monastery as fast as the darkness and the need for silence would allow. No one spoke, but the minds of all were busy with the same problem. What was the meaning of that sound? A gong. Was this the gong of which that poor, crazed, secret service man had babbled? But why was it being sounded now? Had it anything to do with their companions? Again the distant clangour reached them, sharper and louder this time, and as it did so faint quivers seemed to shoot through the rescuers' bodies. What was happening? Colin hastened his pace. • The gong, the Place of Question. Had Khapa been right in his recognition, and if so, what connection was there between the place where erring lamas were taken to be interrogated, and a gong? There must be some connection. At the back of his brain Colin knew what the connection was, but his mind refused to formulate the idea. Boom! Again the brazen sound broke the silence, and again the strange painful quivers struck the hurrying rescuers. Colin shivered. What was the meaning of it all? Every time the gong sounded it felt as though a giant hand plucked at the nerves in his limbs and body and set them vibrating like the strings of a violin. Boom! They were nearing the monastery now, and at a low call from behind him Colin halted, and waited for Lârg and Dick to come up.

"Sahib, let us not go near the gate," whispered the Gurkha. "There may be a watch kept at the gate, and the men within must not know that we have come to rescue my sahib."

"That's true."

Colin looked round. The light which they had seen from their hiding-place was now disclosed as coming from a window about ten feet from the ground and set in the wall of the monastery facing the valley. Colin pointed it out to his companions.

"I think we'd better make a start by looking in there," he whispered. "Sounds to me as though that beastly gong is in the room with the light, and I can't get it out of my mind that the gong has something to do with Uncle John."

His companions nodded.

"Good as anywhere," replied Dick. "And look here, you two. We know there's something wrong about this place, so at the first sign of anyone trying to start a rough house we must shoot first and leave the questions till afterwards. Agreed?"

"Yes."

Now the advance was continued, and very soon it became clear that Colin was right and that the sound of the gong was coming through the lighted window. Every time the brazen notes boomed forth the same painful quivers shot through the companions' bodies, and as they hurried forward and drew nearer to the source of the sounds the quivers grew sharper and more painful. Colin raised a hand to his forehead, and despite the biting cold of the night air wiped away some beads of perspiration. Confound the beastly thing! What they did they would have to do quickly. Now the monastery was just in front of them, and a minute later the three rescuers were

The Gong

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standing close up against the monastery wall beneath the lighted window.

Boom! The rescuers gasped. There was something terrific, something soul-shaking about that gong, now that they heard it close at hand, and Colin's voice trembled as he bade Larg give him a back-up. The little man obeyed, and a few seconds later the boy was standing on the Gurkha's shoulders, and, with his eyes on a level with the sill of the window, was gazing into the room beyond.

Boom!

The sound seemed to strike the boy a physical blow between the eyes, and he almost fell backwards under the shock; then, as the echoes died away and his quivering nerves steadied, he took in the scene before him in one swift glance. What he saw was a large stone-walled room. At the farther end a huge copper gong hung suspended from a metal frame, above which, still quivering in the air, was the wooden hammer, evidently worked by some mechanical means. But the things which held Colin's horrified gaze were nearer at hand. About twenty feet from the window two stone posts were fixed in the floor of the room, and to these posts two men were bound, one of whom was already drooping in his bonds as though he had no strength left in him. Beside this man a lama was standing, at least he was dressed as a lama though his face wore a cruel and remorseless expression, and as the boy watched he saw this man's lips move. Apparently he was asking the bound man a question, for the prisoner shook his head as though refusing to reply; then, as Colin saw the hammer about to descend once more upon the gong, he dropped from Larg's shoulders, and stood shaking against the wall.

"What's the matter? What did you see?"

The Forbidden Land

"Speak, Sahib Colin. Is my master there?"

Colin nodded his head, and raised a hand for silence.

"Yes, he's there," he whispered, "and Khapa, too. But talk quietly, for there's a man standing beside Uncle asking him questions."

"Questions!" exclaimed Dick.

"Yes, but be quiet and let me speak. I understand everything now. This is the Place of Question, and the thing we hear is the gong, and it is the gong which the devils use to force their secrets out of people."

"But, Sahib, I——"

"Hush, Larg, and I'll explain. You know what it feels like when the sound of that gong hits you? You quiver all over and every nerve is set on edge. But up there in the open window it strikes you like a hammer, and what it must be inside the room I can't imagine. It must be torture, agony, it must pound the nerves to jelly and send people mad, and that is what is happening to Uncle now."

"But, Colin, you say there's a man standing beside him. Doesn't the sound trouble him, too?"

"Apparently not. Most likely he's immune. But Uncle isn't. He's being tortured by a sound to reveal his identity and what he's here for, and I don't believe the man beside him is a lama at all. I believe he's a Mongolian disguised as a lama, and we've got to get Uncle and Khapa out of this place before they go mad. Listen now, I've got it all planned. What we must do is this, and we must do it quickly."

For a few more seconds he continued to speak in a rapid undertone; then, as he came to an end, Dick and Larg murmured agreement, and a moment later the work of rescue had begun.

Two lengths of rope were first obtained from their

packs, and with these in his hand, and armed only with his revolver and knife, Colin again mounted on to Larg's shoulders. Once upon a time the window had been divided into two by an upright pillar of which only the stump now remained, and, having cautiously surveyed the scene inside the room, Colin looped one rope round the stump and allowed the two ends to drop down the wall outside.

The first step had been successfully achieved. A means by which his companions might follow had been provided, and again Colin cautiously raised his head. For the moment the working of the fiendish gong appeared to have stopped, for the lama was standing with his back to the window rapidly questioning the boys' uncle, but now, as the prisoner again shook his head, the lama uttered a furious exclamation and, striding down the room, thrust up a lever. Instantly the hammer struck the gong with a reverberating crash which tore at every nerve in the boy's body, but already, taking advantage of the lama's back being turned, Colin had looped the second rope round the broken pillar and dropped the ends inside the room. Now, as the man strode towards his victims, the boy suddenly hauled himself up, and a moment later he had slid to the floor inside the torture chamber.

The surprise was complete. At Colin's sudden appearance the lama halted in his stride and stood gazing at the newcomer in blank amazement; then, as it dawned upon him that the stranger was an enemy, he began to pluck feverishly at the folds of his robe. But the boy gave him no time to draw the pistol or whatever other weapon he had hidden away. Already his own revolver was out and pointing at the man; the next moment he had pulled the trigger and with

a choking sigh the torturer fell to the floor shot through the heart.

Colin's next actions were performed at a rush. Already the terrible gong had struck a dozen times since the work of rescue had begun; now as it clanged forth again, filling the stone-walled room with waves of sound which made every nerve in his body quiver with agony, he stumbled down the long chamber and, clutching hold of the lever, jerked the fiendish thing to a stop. Then up the room he ran and with his knife hacked through the bonds which held his uncle to the pillar. The elder man had fainted, and as the ropes parted he fell forward on to the floor. Colin caught hold of him under the arms and dragged him towards the window. Dick and Larg were already sitting astride the sill, and as soon as Colin had tied the rope round the unconscious man's body they began to haul him up, while the boy below turned back to release Khapa.

How much longer had he? wondered Colin, as he sawed through the thick ropes which bound the young lama to the pillar. Had the report of his pistol been heard? Would the stoppage of the gong awaken the suspicions of the dead man's companions, and bring them to the torture chamber? Now the last rope was cut and Khapa was free. The young monk was conscious, apparently his less civilized nerves had not suffered so much as those of his white companion, and he was able to stagger towards the window without Colin's aid.

"Up with you," the boy encouraged him.

Again the rope came in useful, and, aided by the strong arms above, Khapa had just reached the sill when a shout of warning from Dick made Colin swing round, to see a door at the end of the chamber

burst open and half a dozen men rush into the room. Crack! Crack! Twice Colin pulled the trigger of his revolver, and in that moment he was thankful for the long hours of practice his uncle had insisted upon, for as the shots rang out two men stumbled forward on to the floor. Bang! The sharp report of Dick's rifle sounded overhead, and a third man fell. Colin looked up. Khapa had disappeared, and Larg was calling to him to come. Again Dick's rifle went off, the report sounding deafening in that confined space, followed by Larg's and the crash of a closing door as their two surviving enemies fled. Colin sprang to the rope. They must hurry! There was no knowing how many men there might be in the monastery, or what kind of pursuit would be organized. Hand-over-hand he went up, and swung himself astride the window-sill. Larg and Dick had already dropped to the ground outside. Colin flung down the rope up which he had climbed; then took one more glance back into the torture chamber. The gong caught his eyes, its evil burnished surface winking wickedly in the lamplight as it swung gently to and fro. The sight filled the boy with rage. The gong! How many men had that fiendish thing driven to madness? he wondered. But it should drive no more. He bent down, shouting to Larg to hand him up his rifle, and as the little man obeyed he flung the weapon to his shoulder and fired straight into the centre of that evil, winking eye. Clang! For a moment the room was filled with clamorous echoes which died suddenly in a cracked wailing shriek, and lowering his rifle Colin leaned forward to see the effect of his shot. The great gong was a starred, battered wreck. With a triumphant laugh the boy swung his rifle across his shoulders, and a second later he had slid down the rope and was standing among his friends.

"How's Uncle?" he barked.

"Still unconscious," replied Dick.

"Then we'll have to carry him. Khapa all right? Good! Dick, you and Larg carry Uncle, while I look after our rear. Quick now! They're not liking us inside that monastery, and the sooner we lose ourselves in the darkness the better. All set? Right-o! Off we go."

Three minutes later the Place of Question had disappeared in the gloom behind them, and the only reminder of its presence was the single lighted window of the torture chamber in which hung a broken gong.

CHAPTER XIII

A Friend in Need

There was no pursuit, or if there was it passed the fugitives by in the darkness, and for a couple of hours they struggled wearily forward, taking turns to carry their unconscious companion. Luckily Khapa had recovered sufficiently from his ordeal to do his share of the hard work, but at the end of two hours the fugitives, worn out by cold, hunger and the hardships of the past weeks, were too exhausted to go any farther. So they sought a sheltered spot among some rocks where they laid their burden on the ground, and prepared to pass the night as best they could.

That night was without doubt the most miserable night Colin and Dick had ever spent. Their bodies and limbs ached with fatigue, no food had passed their lips for twenty-four hours, while, as though these hardships were not enough, the night was biting cold, and they were the prey of acute anxiety regarding their uncle's condition. Why did he not regain consciousness? In vain the boys and Larg endeavoured to recall his wandering senses. Apparently the last few strokes of the terrible gong had broken down his resistance, for when his companions had done everything they could, John Hanson still lay in a state of stupor, and gradually a fresh dread was added to the boys' distress, and they asked each other anxiously what would be his condition when his mind did awake.

Slowly the miserable hours passed. Midnight came

without bringing any change in the patient's condition. The boys and Larg took it in turn to keep watch, while those not on duty obtained snatches of dream-haunted uncomfortable sleep, and it was not until the eastern sky was already turning rosy with the approach of dawn that John Hanson showed any signs of returning consciousness. Dick was on watch at the time. He was feeling unutterably weary, and his head kept dropping forward despite all his efforts to keep awake, when suddenly a murmur came from the man beside whom he was sitting, bringing the boy back to consciousness with a jerk and driving all thought of sleep from his mind. At last! Dick leaned eagerly forward the better to hear what his uncle was saying. The elder man was muttering to himself in short jerky sentences, his voice rising and falling as though the speaker was in distress, and presently, with a sharp pang of fear, the boy made out the words:

"Stop that beastly gong! Stop it, you fiend! No, I won't tell you anything. What can I tell you, you fool? My name's Sarol, a wandering tribesman, that's all I am. Stop that beastly gong! Stop it, I say, stop it!"

The mutterings died away, and crossing to where Colin and Larg were sleeping, Dick shook them awake. Colin sat up at once.

"Has he come to?" he asked eagerly.

Dick nodded his head; then, as he made no other reply, and Colin saw the look in his brother's eyes, the face of the elder boy went grey beneath the stain and grime, and he breathed the one word, "Mad?"

"I'm afraid so. He keeps muttering about the gong, the same as that other poor devil they picked up outside Hazra." Suddenly Dick caught hold of his

brother's arm, and for a moment his control threatened to break down. "He's mad, Colin, mad! Think of it. Mad out here! Heavens! what are we going to do?"

Half an hour later it was day. By that time the boys knew for certain that their uncle was for the time being, at least, out of his mind, and plans for the immediate future had been rapidly discussed. There was need for haste. Food was the most urgent necessity, and it was quickly decided that Colin, Dick and Larg should set off in a desperate attempt to bag a mountain sheep, the boys going in one direction and Larg in another, while Khapa remained in camp and kept watch over the demented man. Afterwards?—Colin shrugged his shoulders when Dick put the question.

"Let's wait till we've found something to eat, old chap," he replied. "We'll feel different when we've got some grub inside us, and be better able to face things. Ready? Let's be off, then. Good hunting, Larg. Keep close watch over Sarol, Khapa. We will return as soon as we can."

A minute later the boys were on their way.

During the next two hours Colin and Dick learned to hate Tibet as they had never hated it before. They climbed up rugged mountain slopes, crawled along narrow ledges, peered down into dark gorges, and nowhere did they see a sign of life, nowhere did they see anything that might be food. The land was a desert, a cold barren waste of rock and snow and ice, and at last, thoroughly dispirited and utterly worn out, they threw themselves down on the sunny side of a large boulder to rest.

"Perhaps Larg will have bagged something," said Colin presently, in a voice he tried to make sound much more cheerful than he felt.

"If he hasn't we shan't stand much chance," replied Dick. "I'll just about manage to get back to the camp, and that's all."

The boys lapsed again into gloomy silence. Colin could no longer hide from himself the dangers of their position. With a madman on their hands, in the midst of a country where they couldn't tell friend from foe, without food or shelter, unless fortune changed in their favour soon they would be past help. The boy found himself thinking of Staunton Travers. What would the little man do, he wondered, when they did not return, when their names had been added to the list of those who had entered Tibet and had not come back? Would he send others on the same trail? Would——

The boy raised his head with a jerk. What was that sound? Dick had heard it also, and was frantically signalling him to be silent. There it was again, the rattle of a stone upon the rough hillside which rose behind the boulder against which they were resting. Something was coming down the slope towards them. What was it? A man, sheep? But sheep would surely have scented them? No, they wouldn't, though. The breeze was blowing down the hill, carrying their scent away from anything which was approaching from above. Sheep! Again came the rattle of a stone, followed by the clatter of small hoofs on rock. It was a sheep, probably a family of sheep, for there would surely be more than one, and they were coming down the hillside towards the boulder. Colin looked down the slope, and caught sight of a patch of coarse herbage some distance below. That was what the sheep were making for. Again the stamp of small hoofs broke the silence, followed by others. "So there was more than one sheep, and they were coming down

on the left of the boulder. Colin reached out a trembling hand and gripped his rifle. Dick was already seated with his weapon pressed against his shoulder and aiming at the corner where the sheep must appear. Suddenly Colin was seized by a terrible dread. Suppose they missed? But they mustn't miss! They couldn't miss! It was a matter of life or death, and surely Providence could not have sent the sheep straight towards the boulder behind which they were hidden simply in order that they might miss? The thought steadied Colin's nerves, and suddenly he became as cool as ice and his hands as steady as rocks. They were going to succeed, he knew it. These sheep had been sent to them so that they might live. Uncle would regain his sanity. They would defeat the Mongolians, and . . . A clatter of stones and the slither of hoofs checked further thought, and the next moment a ram and four ewes appeared round the boulder, going down the hillside towards the patch of grass.

The sheep saw the boys in the same moment as the boys saw them, but whereas the boys were expecting the animals, the sheep were taken completely by surprise, and for a split second stood rooted to the ground by astonishment. Then, with a grunt and a clatter of hoofs, the ram spun round, but even as the ewes were about to follow his example two rifles rang out, and two of the animals fell. One apparently was only slightly hurt, for the next instant it was on its feet again, but before it had covered many yards a second bullet from Colin's rifle struck it, and this time it rolled over dead.

It is surprising what influence hope has upon the human body. A few minutes before, Colin and Dick had been feeling almost too weak to move; now,

with the certainty of food before them, they were filled with new strength, and in a few minutes they were striding back towards the camp, each with a ewe slung across his shoulders. Surprisingly too, the camp seemed less far away than they had imagined some time before, and coming within sight of the pile of rocks among which they had passed the night, they saw that Larg had already returned, and had so far prepared for the meal ahead as to have a fire of brushwood burning between two boulders.

"Any luck?" shouted Colin, as they came within speaking distance.

"No, Sahib!" called back the Gurkha. "I saw no burrhel, so hearing your three shots in the distance, and guessing that you must have made a kill, I returned to the camp to make a fire and to have everything ready for the roasting. Truly, young Sahibs, you are great hunters. Two ewes! Ohé! what a sight for hungry men."

"And how is the Uncle Sahib?" asked Colin, handing over his burden to Larg, who immediately began to skin it and cut it into joints with an expert knife.

"He sleeps," replied the little man sadly. "It is better so, young masters, for when he sleeps the mind of my Sahib is at rest."

"But where's Khapa?" asked Dick suddenly, speaking for the first time.

"He had gone to visit a *gomchen*, that is a hermit, Sahib Dick," answered Larg. "It would seem, Sahibs, that while we were away he saw a pilgrim coming down the valley, and went and spoke to the man, hoping to learn something which might be of help to us. The pilgrim told him that he had just been to visit a very holy *gomchen* who lives not far

from here. Thereupon Khapa asked many questions about the *gomchen*, who he was and how he might come to him, and when I got back from my hunting he set off to visit the holy man, promising to return as soon as he could."

"But why has he gone to visit the *gomchen*?" asked Dick. "A hermit can't help us."

"Who knows, Sahib Dick. I have not much use for hermits myself, thinking that men who shut themselves away from the joys of the world are fools, but Khapa, who, for a monk, seems to use his brains, thinks that the *gomchen* may perhaps be willing to give my Sahib shelter until his wandering spirit comes back to him. If he will do that, young Sahib, then in future I shall think more of hermits, for assuredly I do not know how my Sahib will live unless we can find a place where he may rest."

"H'm! In that case I hope the *gomchen* turns out to be a good Samaritan," remarked Colin.

He crossed over and stood looking down anxiously at his uncle. The elder man's face wore a drawn and worried expression, but he was sleeping peacefully, and the boy was thankful it was so, for sleep was infinitely better for the patient than the periods of wild insane mutterings. Perhaps he might awake in his right mind. For a moment hope surged high in the boy's heart; then he remembered the secret service man who had been found outside Ilazra, and turned away with a sigh. That man had not awoken sane, Colin looked round the camp. Dick was sitting on a rock cleaning his rifle, and watching Larg's cooking with an avid intentness which brought a grin to his brother's face. Heavens! how good that meat smelt. They must make some broth for uncle, warm mutton broth. Colin went and squatted down

by Larg's side, and fifteen minutes later the boys and the little Gurkha were feasting off strips of underdone meat, burnt and red in patches, but which nevertheless made the most wonderful meal any of them had ever tasted.

Khapa returned just as they finished eating. He signified that he had good news, but his companions mercifully allowed him to satisfy his hunger before they pressed him for particulars. Meanwhile Larg prepared broth and fed the sick man, who had awoken and was lying on his back muttering incoherently to himself. Colin and Dick stood by while Larg ministered to their uncle, and presently looking up and seeing the expressions on their faces, the little man shook his head despondently.

"My Sahib's spirit has gone on a long journey, and will not come back to him yet awhile," he said. "But do not look so sad, my young Sahibs," he went on more cheerfully. "If this *gomchen* will, indeed, look after my master he may yet become strong and well again, for what my Sahib needs is peace, and peace he will find with the holy hermit. See, he is quiet now, which is good. Now let us hear what Khapa has to say."

"The *gomchen* will receive Sarol," replied Khapa when Colin asked him how he had succeeded with the holy man. "At first he refused, thinking you were men who earned your living by war, but when I told him that you were the friends of the Holy One of Zong, and that you were here to rid the country of the evil men who oppress it, he relented and said that you might bring Sarol to his hermitage. But, brothers, there are conditions. The holy *gomchen* is old and feeble, and he cannot care for Sarol unaided, so he has decreed that I, who am of his own faith,

shall remain to watch over Sarol while you and Larg go on your way. Also, Kachi, the holy man offers you and Nattoo and Larg shelter for this night. Who knows, Kachi? Perhaps in his wisdom the *gomchen* will be able to aid you in your task."

"Looks rather as though we are in a cleft stick," remarked Colin in English some minutes later as he and Larg between them helped John Hanson's stumbling footsteps over the rough ground. "What do you think, Larg? Is it safe to leave the Uncle Sahib in the care of the *gomchen* and Khapa, or should one of us insist on staying to watch over him?"

"I think he will be safe, Sahib Colin," replied the little man. "These hermits are good men, and Khapa is one whom we may trust. Also, Sahib, some *gomchen* have strange powers, and it may be that this hermit will be able to call back my master's wandering spirit better even than the hakims of the west. Besides, Sahib Colin, I do not see what else we can do. We have a task to perform, and though my Sahib is ill the task remains. Gladly would I stay with my Sahib, but I know that he places this task before himself, for some days ago he made me swear that if anything happened to him so that he could not continue on this journey, then I would leave him and go on with you and the Sahib Dick till the task was accomplished. He made me swear, Sahib Colin, though I did not want to, and it was an oath I dare not break."

"So. Well, that's settled, and I can't help saying I am glad, Larg, for Dick and I must go on, and how we could hope to succeed without you, I do not know. Hullo! this old man must be the *gomchen* come forth to welcome us."

While Colin and Larg were speaking, Dick and Khapa had been leading the way along a narrow

track, and now the travellers suddenly saw before them an aged man standing at the door of a small stone hut. At least it appeared to be a hut, but nearer approach proved it to be a cave in the hillside, the opening to which had been blocked up with a rough wall of stones, with the exception of one small aperture for a window, and another in which hung a rickety door. So this was the home of the *gomchen*. Khapa bowed and the boys and Larg saluted in answer to the old man's gesture of welcome; then, at a sign from the hermit, Colin and Larg helped the sick man through the low doorway and laid him down upon a couch of cushions arranged upon the floor.

"Is this he whose spirit has been driven away by the Gong of Question?" asked the old man, bending over the invalid, who had recommenced his insane mutterings.

"This is he, Father," replied Colin. "He did no wrong, but they tied him to a post and the gong spoke to him, and now we ask you to do what you can to recall his spirit from the place where it has gone."

The old man nodded, and, seating himself on the ground beside the patient, fixed his eyes on his face and appeared to drop into deep contemplation. For some seconds the boys watched him, then, seeing that he appeared to have forgotten their presence, they turned their heads and began to examine their surroundings. *

The cave was a large one, and was by no means lacking in comfort, considering its bleak environment. Scrolls of religious paintings decorated the walls along the base of which were several wooden chests. A gaily painted table stood in the centre of the floor, and a couple of deep recesses in the rock walls evi-

dently served the purposes of kitchen and chapel to the hermit, for the boys could see rough cooking utensils in one, while in the second a small stone altar had been built on which stood butter lamps and copper bowls containing offerings of water and grain. The rest of the furnishings consisted of more cushions and rugs, and outside, as the boys learned later, was a stout wooden hut in which the *gomchen* stored the food brought to him by the pilgrims who came in numbers to visit the holy man in his lonely retreat. The boys looked at each other, and their eyes signalled satisfaction. Certainly they were lucky to find such a place to shelter their uncle in his distress; the next moment the voice of the hermit interrupted their thoughts, and they turned to find that he had come out of his reverie and was speaking to them.

"Kachi and Nattoo," he said, "I have been silent a long time, for my spirit had to go forth to seek the wandering spirit of this man, and it had a long way to go. But I found it at last. The spirit of this man was lonely and miserable, but my spirit spoke to it and comforted it, and now it is lonely and miserable no longer, for it knows that one day it will return to this house from which it was driven forth. So be comforted also, young strangers from beyond the seas. Khapa and I will look after Sarol, though I think his name is not Sarol but something else, and when you return, you and that little man with the broad honest face, you will find that Sarol's wandering spirit has come back to him."

"How do you know that we have come from beyond the seas?" asked Dick, gazing into the old man's wrinkled face. "Do we not speak the language well? Is not our disguise good?"

"So well. so good. Nattoo. that it requires old

wise ears and eyes like mine to tell the difference between the real and the unreal.' Therefore have no fear. Now sit down, Kachi and Nattoe, and you also, Larg and Khapa, and Kachi, because you are the elder brother, you shall, if you will, tell me of this task you have come to do and about which Khapa has already spoken. I shall not betray you, and it may be that I shall be able to help you with good advice."

For a second Colin hesitated; then he plunged into his story. They must trust somebody, and this old man already knew too much if he was an enemy, while as a friend he might be able to tell them many useful pieces of information which he had gleaned from the pilgrims who visited him. So he told the story of their adventures from beginning to end, the *gomchen* listening without interruption, and when he had finished, the old man again seemed to drop into a reverie.

Thus for some minutes they sat in silence; then Colin, who was eager for news, ventured to break in upon the holy man's thoughts.

"Do you think we shall succeed, Father?" he asked.

The *gomchen* looked up with a smile.

"Ah! the impatience of youth," he replied. "You cannot even wait while an old man thinks. Still, I have done. Will you succeed, Kachi? I am not a prophet, though you have been brought safely through so many perils that I think there must be some reason for your preservation in this world. So perhaps you may succeed. Good ever triumphs over evil in the end, and it may be that you are the instruments chosen for this task. I cannot tell, nevertheless I may possibly be able to help you a little along the path to attainment. Your way lies south. Before to-morrow morning I will draw you a map showing the route

you must follow, and in seven days time you will come to a wide valley along the bottom of which runs a broad well-worn track. That is one of the roads used by your enemies who have laid such cruel hands upon this land, and who force all those they can capture to work for them. Along this track travel great caravans, and it is my advice that you join one of these, mingling with the yak drivers and others in the caravan so that the Mongolian guards shall not know you are there. By such means you may perhaps come unsuspected to the place where you will find the beginning of the answer to that secret you have come to unravel. What that secret is I do not know. I have asked many, but no one has been able to give me an answer, for only those who are forced go near the beginning of the secret, and, once there, it would seem that there is no return. That is all I know, Kachi. Now my advice to you and your companions is rest. Maybe in the days to come there will be little time for such refreshment."

And rest Colin, Dick and Larg did. They slept till sunset, when Khapa aroused them for a meal, after which they immediately went to sleep again, and this time they did not wake up until the sun was already high in the sky the following morning. The boys' first inquiry was for their uncle, but Khapa shook his head.

"He will not know you, my brothers," he replied. "He is weak and his mind still wanders in a strange country."

Words which proved too true, for when Colin and Dick spoke to the sufferer he took no notice of them, but continued his pathetic mutterings in which harsh curses mingled with frantic prayers that someone would release him from the terror of the gong. Sick

at heart, the boys turned away and ate the breakfast Khapa had prepared for them, and an hour later they were on the road again, carrying with them in their packs a supply of mutton and other food sufficient to last them for several days, which had been pressed upon them by the friendly *gomchen*.

CHAPTER XIV

In the 'Enemy's Camp

Seven days had passed, and the boys and Larg were seated on the side of the wide valley about which the *gomchen* had spoken. They had been days of hard, grinding toil through the cruellest, coldest country in the world, and the nights had been spent either in the open or in the crowded interior of some vermin-infested Tibetan hut. Colin and Dick didn't know which they liked less, sleeping in the open or indoors. In the open there was no vermin, but the cold was often so intense that it was impossible to sleep; indoors. . . . Well, the boys had long ago decided that the less one thought about a Tibetan house the better. The dirt was indescribable, and apparently no Tibetan ever washed, from the cradle to the grave. Usually the ground floor was occupied by a stable from which the living-room above was reached by a wooden staircase, and once in the living-room the stranger was greeted by an appalling atmosphere composed of the smell of cooking, filth, the reek of hot human bodies, smoke from the fire of burning yaks' dung, and the rancid scent of the butter lamps burning before the family shrine. There were no windows, no chimneys, to these rooms. A circular hole in the roof allowed a portion of the smoke to escape, and admitted light during the day, but, though almost everything that they should not be, these Tibetan living-rooms had one redeeming virtue, they were warm, and warmth

in a land where for three hundred and sixty days out of the year the wind is a knife which goes through the thickest clothing, was a quality which far outweighed dirt and smells and vermin.

Colin was thinking of these Tibetan houses and the villages of which they formed part while he and his companions sat overlooking the broad trail of which the *gomchen* had told them. Always, once their friendly nature was known, they had been kindly and hospitably received, but almost every time they had been welcomed by old men and women. In few of the villages they had passed through were there any young men or men in the prime of life to be seen. When asked where their menfolk were, the women had looked startled and afraid; then, when assured that their questioners were friendly, they had poured out the same tale, a tale of armed men who had suddenly appeared and carried off their menfolk by force. Why? Invariably Colin had asked that question, and invariably he had received the same answer, a shake of the head. But the boy and his companions knew why. The men had been taken away to work for their captors. Somewhere in Tibet a vast and secret enterprise was being pressed forward at express speed, an enterprise which called for a huge army of labourers, and these inoffensive Tibetans, forced from their homes, were the men who formed the army. Truly, mused the boy, the Mongolians held Tibet in a grip of steel, and to break that grip, to bring the great enterprise to naught, there were just three—himself, and Dick, and Larg. Well, other men had won against long odds, so why shouldn't they, and once the nature of the enterprise was in their possession it would be back to England and Stanton Travers as fast as they could travel. Of course, it might not be so easy as all that. The *gomchen* had said

that those who learned the secret never returned, which either meant that they were killed, or, what was much more likely, that they were kept prisoners in large concentration camps and compelled to labour for their captors. In that case they would have to form some other plan between them. A loose nut could wreck a great engine, and three determined men in the midst of a vast enterprise might do much to wreck that enterprise provided they could lay their hands on the right tools.

"What are we going to do? Are we going to wait here till a caravan passes? Is that the idea?"

Dick's voice interrupted Colin's thoughts, and the elder boy raised his head.

"That's the plan," he replied. "As soon as a caravan appears we'll follow it, keeping out of sight during the day, but when it gets dark we shall go down and mingle with the crowd."

"H'm! That means we may have to wait here days. Still, I suppose it is risky going farther alone."

"Larg and I both think so," replied his brother. "We haven't seen many Mongolians yet, but now we have reached one of their regular routes it's quite likely that there may be pickets posted among the hills, and the nearer we get to their base the greater will be the chance of discovery. That is, if we continue on alone. But who's going to notice us in a crowd? I reckon there's not a Tibetan in Tibet dirtier than we are. Heavens! what wouldn't I give for a hot steaming bath and clean clothes."

Again the conversation lagged, and noon found the travellers still sitting behind their screen of boulders watching the trail below. They had been sitting there for three hours, and during that time they had seen no signs of human beings; now, all of a sudden, a

distant humming sound was heard and, looking up, they saw away to the south three aeroplanes in formation flying westward. Colin whipped out his glasses and focused them on the distant machines. They were army aeroplanes bearing the colours of Mongolia, and the boys and Larg watched them, fascinated, as they disappeared in the distance. It was the first sign of air activity they had seen since entering the country, and it brought home to the watchers the fact that they were now definitely on the enemy's line of advance. Where were they going? the boys wondered. To the Mongolian base? Where was the base? A hundred miles away, two hundred, and what would they find when they got there? Colin slipped the glasses back into their secret pocket, and turned to resume his watch on the trail below, and so it happened that he was the first to see the distant cloud of dust amid which small black objects moved slowly towards them down the valley.

A caravan! Instantly the watchers were on the alert, and now for a couple of hours they sat hidden from view by the surrounding boulders while there passed below them a long straggling line of men and beasts. In front rode a detachment of soldiers mounted on small shaggy horses, and thereafter, every fifty yards or so on both sides of the line, rode an armed and mounted man whose evident duty it was to prevent any of the human animals in the caravan from effecting their escape. The boys and Larg watched the scene with interest. Apparently this was a labour caravan, for, apart from some scores of burdened yaks, most of the long line consisted of hundreds of Tibetan men and boys who trudged wearily along under the watchful eyes of their captors. Colin looked at them through his glasses. Every face bore the same hopeless, resigned

expression, and the boys wondered angrily how many villages had been swept clear of their male population to fill those ranks and to give the Mongolians the necessary forced labour for their enterprise. That enterprise. What actually could it be? Was Dick going to prove right after all?

At last the end of the caravan came in sight, with another squadron of mounted soldiers acting as rear-guard, and as they passed the boys and Larg rose to their feet and started off down a shallow gully which ran parallel with the main valley. There they were hidden from the sight of the enemy below, and so they continued all through the afternoon till the approach of darkness brought the caravan to a halt.

Now came the most dangerous part of their immediate task. They had to join the caravan without being detected by the Mongolian guards. The matter had been discussed with Larg, and, as it was certain that armed men would at once be noticed by their enemies, they had buried their rifles and rifle ammunition under a pile of stones, retaining only their knives and pistols hidden in the folds of their garments. Now, as twilight slowly gave place to darkness, the three companions lay behind some boulders, watching the scene below and waiting till it was dark enough to cover their advance.

From where they lay the boys and Larg could see the captive Tibetans gathering huge quantities of brushwood, and before long fires began to appear in all directions. Meanwhile the Mongolian guards had tethered and tended their horses, and they were now standing about in groups keeping a sharp eye upon everything that was taking place around them. Presently, so Larg averred, these guards would move higher up into the hills, and form a cordon round the camp, and

it was while this movement was going on, and the cordon was being formed, that the companions hoped to make their unnoticed entry.

"What about it, Larg?" whispered Colin, after an interval during which the darkness had deepened until the valley was a pool of shadow broken only by the twinkling lights of the fires. "Isn't it dark enough now?"

"Wait a little longer, young Sahib," replied the Gurkha. "Remember, it is lighter up here than down in the valley, and anyone looking up can see while we who look down are blind."

So another fifteen minutes were allowed to pass, by which time the darkness was so complete that the companions could barely see each other, and then, at last, Larg gave the word to advance.

"But be very careful, young Sahibs," he whispered. "A rolling stone may betray us to our enemies, for stones do not roll without cause, and when I stop, stop also, and lie on the ground as though dead, even if the Mongolians pass within a foot of where you lie."

He crept away into the darkness, and a moment later Colin and Dick were following close behind. It was a queer business creeping downhill on all fours, and before they had gone far the boys had given up all attempts to peer ahead, and were following Larg blindly, while they devoted all their attention to moving without sound. Even so they could not avoid dislodging an occasional pebble, and each time a whisper came from the little man in front warning them to be more careful. So half the descent was covered, and then suddenly Larg halted. The boys lay beside him listening. Had their companion heard anything? The only sounds they could hear were the noises of the camp below, and after an interval Larg apparently

came to the same decision, for he continued the stealthy advance. But now the little man stopped frequently, and at last, coming to some boulders which lay directly in their path, he halted again and pressed an ear to the ground. Colin raised his head. They were about five hundred yards from the nearest fire, and between them and it lay a region of utter blackness which might have housed a regiment of men unseen. Where were the Mongolians? Was Larg right? Would they form a high cordon round the camp, and were they at that moment moving up hill through the darkness? He heard Dick stir beside him; then came a low whisper from Larg, and, straining their ears, the boys caught the words.

"They are coming, Sahibs. Now be silent or we are dead men."

The next few minutes left an indelible impression on the minds of Colin and Dick. The night was very dark, and the only sounds were the noises from the distant camp and the sighing of the wind as it blew down the valley, piercing their thick clothing like scores of frozen pin points. But the boys were not conscious of feeling at that moment. They were listening, listening for the approach of men who, they knew, would kill them without mercy if once they were discovered and their object known. It was a horrible, helpless sensation. So, Colin imagined, a sheep might feel in the slaughterhouse as it awaited the approach of the slaughterer. At first they could hear nothing; then presently, out of the darkness, came a distant clatter, which gradually developed into the sound of scrambling feet. The Mongolians were coming. Would they pass near their hiding-place? Suppose, thought Dick, the approaching men chose to take up position behind the very boulders close to

which they were lying? It was not a pleasant thought, and the boy slipped his hand into the pocket where his revolver lay. Now the oncoming men were very close and their voices were plainly audible. There came the sound of a stumble, followed by an oath, and a few seconds later the footsteps passed within two yards of where the companions were lying, and, glancing sideways, Colin and Dick caught sight of four vague figures visible for a moment in the gloom before they disappeared in the darkness above. From the boys came inaudible sighs as pent-up breath; then, as the stumbling footsteps died away behind them, Larg moved.

"Follow me, Sahibs," he whispered; "and keep low. We are inside the cordon, but not yet is it safe to stand up lest those above should see us against the fires, and guess that we are strangers."

So saying, he started off again through the darkness, followed by the boys. The rest of the strange journey proved uneventful, however, and thirty minutes later the three companions were squatting round a fire with a score of Tibetans, eating a thin stew of boiled yak's meat, without any questions having been raised as to who they were and whence they had come.

In the days that followed, the boys and Larg congratulated themselves many times on having followed the *gomchen's* advice. Three, among so many equally ragged and equally dirty, the Mongolian guards took no notice of them, while the Tibetans were too concerned with their own sorrows to worry about anybody but themselves. Moreover, after the hard travelling of the past weeks, the comparatively leisurely advance of the caravan was restful, and as they trudged steadily along the companions found plenty of time for thought. The thing which impressed Colin most

was the apparent perfection with which the Mongolians had planned the tremendous coup. Here they had taken armed possession of another country, enslaving the population and forcing the people to do their will, and the outside world knew nothing about it. Of course the position and character of Tibet, with its girdle of mountains and bare inhospitable interior, were particularly favourable for such an enterprise, but even so, the feat was a remarkable one, and if the rest of the enemy's plans had been laid with the same efficiency the British people might find themselves up against something which would require all their strength to combat. And they alone, outside the enemy's councils, had definite knowledge of the plot. Could they frustrate it? Would they be able to escape and carry news back to England, when so many others had failed? Often, as they marched along, they discussed the matter in undertones. Were they doing right in going on? Had they done wrong in joining the caravan, and ought they to try and escape now, while there was a good chance, and return with what news they had? Yet, on the other hand, what news actually had they? The Mongolians were in possession of Tibet. They were preparing for some vast enterprise. That was all. What the enterprise was, where it had its beginning and against whom it was directed, they still did not know beyond all shadow of doubt, though they might hold strong opinions on the matter; and it was proof, not their opinions, which Staunton Travers wanted and which they had been sent out to find. No. Every time they discussed the matter they arrived at the same conclusion, that they did not yet know enough to return, and so, day after day, they trudged on over the barren uplands of Tibet, sweating by day under their heavy clothing,

frozen at night by the icy wind, and every evening when they made camp they were a little nearer to a range of dazzling peaks, which stretched their ice-clad ramparts across the southern horizon.

It was the fifth day after joining the caravan that they came to the rail-head, and somehow the sight of a puffing engine and a long line of trucks did not surprise the companions. They had expected something of the kind as they neared the base, and did not worry their minds as to how the engine and trucks and miles of rails had got there. They were there, that was enough. After all, a nation which could take possession of another country unknown to the rest of the world was quite capable of conveying heavier things than engines and rails to any destination they desired, and it was in a more cheerful frame of mind than they had been in for days that the boys and Larg took their places with two score Tibetans in one of the trucks and puffed away southward. At last they were nearing the beginning of the secret, the place they had come so far to find, and no one suspected them. Surely that was an augury of success.

Five hours later the train came to a stop in the middle of a vast armed camp, previous to which the travellers had for some miles passed through signs of ever-increasing activity. They had seen hangars capable of housing scores of fighting machines, batteries of anti-aircraft guns in position—evidently the Mongolians were prepared to deal with any threat from the air, and equally evident was their determination that no hostile aircraft arriving in that locality should ever return with news of what was taking place—and later on the train had passed between line after line of well-built hutments, outside which lounged squat, flat-faced infantrymen who gazed at the passing train

and its human freight with inscrutable lack-lustre eyes. Wherever the boys and Larg looked they had seen signs of first-class organization and preparation. Good roads ran in all directions, and along these flashed motor-cars bearing officers from one part of the camp to another.* They saw power-houses, the whirring dynamos of which were worked by rushing torrents; more aerodromes, more anti-aircraft batteries, barracks, vast store-houses, and at last, towards evening, the train had come to a stop in the shadow of a high cliff, beyond which rose mountain peak after mountain peak until lost in the hazy distance. Then it was that the boys saw the opening. It was at the foot of the cliff, a huge half-circle faced with stone, and beyond it, stretching away as far as eyes could see, was a great underground causeway lit by glaring electric lights. Lines of rails lay along the floor of the causeway, and even as the boys watched, an electric train flashed into sight and came to a stop at a platform just outside the opening. Dick gripped hold of Colin's arm.

"The tunnel, Colin," he whispered. "I was right."

Colin nodded his head. • Dick was right. There was the beginning of the tunnel; where was its end intended to be?

CHAPTER XV

The Tunnel

That night the boys and Larg spent herded in a large hut with scores of Tibetans who had been their companions in the long trek. The terror of the poor creatures was pitiable. They had never seen a railway train, motor-cars, anti-aircraft guns or any other of the appendages to civilization before, and they were quite sure they had come to the abode of devils, and the next morning they had to be forcibly driven on to the electric train which was to convey them into the tunnel.

"Heavens, what swine!" exclaimed Colin under his breath, as he, Dick and Larg stood in a truck and watched a squad of armed Mongolian soldiers driving shrieking Tibetans before them at the point of the bayonet. "The poor brutes think they're going to the underworld to be tortured, and no wonder. This tunnel must look like the very gate of hell to them, and this train a hungry serpent serving the devils below. Don't take too much notice though, Dick, or we shall attract attention. Hullol! we're off at last," as the remaining Tibetans were forced shrieking into the waiting trucks. "Well, here we are, old chap, in a tunnel which we are practically certain was made by Professor Ramsay's tunnelling machine, and which, we believe, is going straight through to India, and the question is, what are we going to do about it?"

"Looks like waiting and seeing," replied Dick in

the same cautious tones. "But, Colin, I wish uncle was here. These Mongolians give me the shivers, and one feels so absolutely helpless against such a crowd."

"I know. Our situation is pretty grim. Perhaps, after all, we should have gone while the going was good. Still we didn't, so it's no good wishing we had. Anyway, no one suspects us, Dick, so let's learn everything we can, and then we'll set our wits to work and try to think of some way of escaping. If we could pinch one of those 'planes we'd be in India in no time."

The boys lapsed into silence, and, indeed, there was sufficient to occupy their interest. The tunnel was wide enough to take two lines of rails with a narrow track for pedestrians on either side, and it ran straight ahead for mile after mile at an almost dead level, though sometimes it appeared to the boys to slope upwards in a long gentle incline. It was a marvellous piece of engineering. In some places it was faced with stone, but for most of the distance the walls and roof consisted of bare, naked rock. Great electric globes glared down from the ceiling, and every few miles smaller tunnels branched off to right or left, tunnels which, the boys guessed, led to the open air above, and which had been used to remove the vast amount of debris from the underground workings.

At first, except for an occasional train, which ran past them towards the main exit, there was little evidence of any intense activity, but as they travelled farther and farther from the entrance, signs of the work which must be going on ahead became more and more frequent. Electric engines drawing long lines of trucks laden with broken rock passed them and disappeared up side tunnels. Gangs of Tibetan

labourers, under Mongolian overseers, were seen repairing the permanent way of trudging wearily to some destination farther in the tunnel, and then, all of a sudden, the tunnel came to an end and the train entered an underground cavern so vast and huge that its confines were lost in the distance.

The boys looked around them in mute amazement. The cave was a vast underground camp. Electric globes fixed to high standards strove to banish the intense gloom, and on all sides burned twinkling fires round which were grouped the figures of Tibetan labourers, either engaged in cooking food over the flames, or rolled up in blankets and sleeping the sleep of utter exhaustion upon the hard rock floor. So this was where the labourers in the great enterprise were kept and had their being! Underground, like the ponies in a coal-pit. What fiends the Mongolians were; the next moment the train came to a sudden stop, and immediately a squad of Mongolian soldiers appeared and began to drive the terrified Tibetans out of the trucks.

But the respite was short-lived. The new arrivals were rapidly broken up into groups and added to squads of men already standing by in readiness; then, while some were marched off in one direction, others, among whom were the boys and Larg, were driven back into the train, and in a few minutes they were off again, travelling deeper and deeper into the tunnel. Evidently the Mongolians taught the new recruits their duties by the simple method of drafting them into squads of labourers already accustomed to the work they had to do.

"Looks as though we're going to the tunnel-head," whispered Dick in Colin's ear. "If so, perhaps we'll see the tunnelling machine. Poor old Ramsay,

what a fit he'd have if he knew the purpose to which his beloved machine was being put."

"I don't know about that," replied Colin in the same cautious tones. "If you ask me, I should say he'd feel jolly bucked. What better proof could he want of the greatness of his invention than a tunnel of this description?"

"H'm! yes, perhaps so. I say, Colin, by the look of things we must be getting near the working-face."

The aspect of their surroundings was certainly changing. The neatness and the finished appearance of the tunnel through which they had travelled so far had been replaced by scenes of busy activity. In one place some labourers were filling a crack with cement, at another, where the rock was less solid, they were facing the tunnel with blocks of granite. A train trundled slowly past them, laden with debris, while they moved as slowly forward, sometimes stopping altogether while the ladders of men working on the roof were moved out of their way, at others crawling along at a snail's pace through hundreds of toiling labourers who were guarded by armed soldiers, and who, as the train passed, raised faces marked with such utter hopelessness that the boys turned their heads to avoid looking at the harrowing sight.

"Gosh! those poor devils look as though they were all in," gasped Dick in an agitated whisper as the labourers were left behind and the train gathered speed again. "What happens when any of them peg out, do you think, Colin?"

"Taken out and tipped into a ravine with the rest of the rubbish, I expect," replied the boy bitterly. "You can bet the Mongolians aren't worrying about how many lives the job costs. Hullo! hear that noise,

Dick? Sounds like. . . . I say, old chap, I believe it's the tunnelling machine at work."

The noise in question was a rasping roaring sound, which increased rapidly in volume as the train advanced. The air, too, had suddenly become filled with fine powdery dust, and a few minutes later the train stopped and its load of human beings ordered roughly to descend. Eagerly the boys looked about them. The uproar was almost deafening and the dust so thick that they could only see with difficulty though great arc-lights flared above, but presently they made out a huge gleaming shield in front of them, from the centre of which a cascade of broken rock was being spewed in a never-ceasing stream, and which, as fast as it appeared, was shovelled by scores of desperately working men into long lines of trucks waiting to receive it. The tunnelling machine! Professor Ramsay's invention, the plans of which had been stolen from their home in Hampstead twenty months ago, and which now they saw before them eating its way through the mountain barriers of Tibet like some gigantic worm burrowing through the heart of the earth. What——"

"Sahibs, do not look too long at the rock-eating machine, or you will attract notice!" shouted Larg, and so great was the turmoil that his words reached the boys as a whisper. "See, Sahibs, we are here to relieve those men who are shovelling the rock into the train, so let us get to work before we draw the attention of the guards upon us."

It was good advice, as the boys instantly saw, so they picked up two shovels which had been thrown down by the men they were relieving, and fell to work upon the rapidly accumulating pile of rock. What a labour that was! They were all three fit and strong, and at first they made light work of the perpetual

shovelling, but gradually, as the time passed, their arms and backs began to ache. There was no respite. The gigantic machine never stopped its crunching roar, never for a moment ceased to spew forth the unending stream of rock, and no sooner was one line of trucks filled and dragged off by an engine up the tunnel than another train was backed into position and the terrible labour began again. Shovel, shovel. Before very long the boys were hating the late Professor Ramsay and Maulanium and the tunnelling machine with a violent hatred. Did the infernal thing never stop? Did the drills or blades or whatever the things were which broke up the rock, never wear out or need replacing? Now and then, in brief pauses for breath, they wiped the sweat from their eyes and tried to take in details of the gleaming metal contraption which crashed and roared in front of them, but the dust-laden air made it difficult to see properly. Evidently the boring face was some distance ahead, for every now and then a door opened in the metal shield and men in overalls passed in or out, while from all round the shield projected great metal arms, the ends of which gripped the rock tenaciously, and which, at intervals, jerked out another foot of length as the huge, gleaming, earth-shaking machine lurched forward in the tunnel it had made.

So the body-breaking toil went on until it seemed to the boys as though they had been labouring for uncounted hours amid the choking dust and never-ceasing uproar, and every shovelful of rock thrown into a truck sent agonizing pains shooting through their limbs and bodies. How much longer was it going on? they asked themselves. Warily they looked around. Some of the Tibetans were hardly working at all despite the angry shouts of their guards, who

were striving to force them to new exertions, while one poor fellow had fallen face downward on the pile of rock upon which he had been working and lay as though dead. Was he dead? Colin wondered. More rubbish to be thrown away. He saw a Mongolian guard looking at him, and bent again to his labours. Shovel, shovel. Heavens! if this lasted much longer he would be like the poor chap who was lying on his face. He glanced anxiously at Dick. The younger boy looked grey with fatigue, but Larg was still working away vigorously. The Gurkha must be made of steel, Colin decided; the next moment he saw that men all around him were throwing down their shovels, and with a feeling of exquisite relief the boy realized that a train-load of fresh toilers had arrived to take over, and that for the time being their own labours were at an end.

Half an hour later the three companions were back in the huge cave. As the men came off the train each one was handed a ration of food and water, after which it appeared they were allowed to go where they pleased. Evidently the Mongolians had no cause to fear their escape from the cave, and as the reason for this apparent freedom dawned upon Colin his already depressed spirits suffered a further fall. If escape was impossible how were they to carry news of what was happening back to England? He glanced around. Their fellow labourers had already flung themselves down close to the first fires they came to, but Larg and Dick were standing a short distance away, and as the little man caught Colin's eyes he made a barely perceptible sign for him to follow. What was up now? the boy wondered. Still, no doubt Larg knew what he was doing, and, anyway, he was too tired to care. He fell into place behind the pair

in front, and presently the three companions had left the main group of fires behind and reached a part of the cave where the fires were fewer and farther apart and were for the most part surrounded by small groups of sleeping men.

"We shall be safer here, Sahib Colin," said the little Gurkhā as the boy caught up, "and can talk with less risk of being overheard. See, there is a fire with a single man sleeping beside it. Let us share that fire, Sahibs, and while you rest I will cook some food, and after that you shall sleep, and then, when you awake, we will talk and make plans. But we will not make plans till you have rested, Sahibs, for tired men plan badly."

Colin and Dick nodded their agreement, and a few minutes later they were seated round the fire, while Larg, having replenished the blaze from a stack of fuel near at hand, was already at work cooking a stew in a pan miraculously produced from one of the pockets in his voluminous Tibetan cloak. The hot food did the boys good, but they were asleep almost before the meal was over, and so tired were they that even the hardness of their couch could not disturb their slumbers.

Colin was the first to wake. He had slept for several hours, and his first conscious feelings were those of warmth and well-being. Slowly he opened his eyes. The fire was burning brightly, which accounted for the warmth, while the food and long rest were no doubt responsible for his feeling so fit. He stretched himself. No, he wasn't even stiff, a proof of fitness which gave him a feeling of keen satisfaction; then, as he became more aware of his surroundings, he made out the figure of a tall man seated on the opposite side of the fire, and overheard the whispered words,

"Om mane padme hum",¹ being repeated over and over again.

The boy started imperceptibly. The man was a lama. But what was a lama doing in that underground world, telling his beads and murmuring the sacred words? Was he a prisoner of the Mongolians? He must be. Probably he had been torn from some quiet monastery and brought there to toil with others of his countrymen. The boy lay still, listening to the whispered repetition and thinking deeply. A lama might be very useful to them, provided he could be made to believe in them and in the mission they were engaged upon. But how could that desirable state of affairs be brought about? With the *gomchen* they had had Khapa to recommend them, at Zong . . . Zong! Ah! he had it. The secret word which had opened the gates of Zong might also open the gates of this lama's belief, and his uncle had told it to him one day in case he should ever be in a situation to use it. And here was the situation. The boy sat up and looked round to make sure that no stranger was within hearing. The lama had taken no notice of his movement, but now, as Colin leaned towards him, the man raised his eyes for a moment, and, as the boy murmured the secret word, a look of tremendous astonishment passed over his face, sweeping from it the ecstasy of prayer in which he had been sunk. So for a moment the monk and the boy stared at each other; then the lama's lips shaped themselves into a question.

"Who are you," he asked, "and who told you that word?"

"We are the friends of the Holy One of Zong,"

¹"Hail to the sacred jewel of the lotus." The words are an allusion to the Buddhist belief that Buddha was born from a lotus flower, and the constant repetition of the phrase by the lamas as they tell their beads is believed to have celestial merits.

replied Colin in the same cautious tones; "and he taught me the word."

Now followed a brief silence during which the lama, who appeared to be a man in the prime of life, studied the boy with keen, inquiring eyes. Apparently the inspection satisfied him, for presently he continued his questions.

"You speak of 'we'," he said. "Are the boy and the little man I see sleeping beside you your friends?"

"The boy is Nattoo, my brother, and the little man is named Larg, and he comes from India and is our friend and companion. My own name is Kachi, Holy One."

"From India," repeated the lama. "But where do you come from, Kachi, who know the secret word, you and your brother? Your names and your skins are dark, but I do not think that your names are your right names or that your skins are their right colour."

"They are not," replied Colin, promptly deciding that having trusted the lama so far they must trust him altogether. "In our own country we bear other names and our skins are really white, and we come from England, a land far away beyond the sea, a land which is friendly to Tibet but which does not trust the Mongolians."

"Ah!"

The exclamation was followed by a long pause during which the lama appeared to be considering what he had heard, and when at length he spoke again it was to ask the question Colin had been expecting.

"You say your skins are white and that you come from a land called England beyond the sea, but if that is so, Kachi, why are you and your companions

here in the power of the devils who have brought such misery on this land? Did they capture you and bring you here by force?"

"No. We disguised ourselves and put ourselves into their power by our own choice," replied Colin. "Listen, Holy One," he went on hastily as he saw the disbelief spring up in the lama's eyes. "I will tell you our story, and when you have heard it you shall judge whether I am speaking the truth or not. But, in return for my story, I ask this. If, when I have finished, you believe my words, will you help me and my friends to destroy the plans of the Mongolians? Will you do that? For it is to destroy the works of the Mongolians that we have come so far."

"To destroy the works of the Mongolians." The lama repeated the words under his breath, and as he did so it was as though flames leapt to life in his eyes. "To destroy the works of the Mongolians, did you say, stranger from beyond the sea? Aye, if that is truly what you are here for, and if I believe the words you are going to speak, then, indeed, will I help you even with life itself, though I cannot see how four men can succeed in such an enterprise. Still, tell me your tale and your thoughts, and if I believe I will tell you my tale and my thoughts, and perhaps between us, and with the Holy Buddha's help, we shall think of a way to destroy these devils who steal men's lives as others might steal a grain of rice. So speak, Kachi. I see that your companions are awake, and they shall bear witness to your words."

Colin cast a glance at Dick and Larg, who had awoken and were lying on the ground listening to his conversation with the lama. But he did not speak to them, fearing that he might arouse the monk's distrust, and without more ado he started to tell the story of

their adventures. The lama listened in silence, nodding his head when Colin spoke of their reception and escape from Zong and his uncle's ordeal under the gong, but when at last the boy came to an end he asked him to describe the home of the *gomchen* where John Hanson had found shelter. This Colin did, describing the pictures on the walls, the coloured table and the little recesses used for kitchen and chapel with such detail that the lama nodded his satisfaction.

"I see you speak the truth, Kachi," he said at last. "That is, indeed, the home of the holy *gomchen*, for I know it well, and because I have found no lie in your words I believe that you are indeed here to destroy the Mongolians, and will do all that I can to aid you. My name is Dangung. Speak now. How may we perform this most meritorious deed?"

"There are two ways, Dangung," replied Colin, speaking slowly. "The first is that I and my friends shall escape from this underworld place and carry news of what the Mongolians are doing back to England. Against that there is the difficulty of escape, and also the possibility that, when our news is told to the rulers of England, it may mean a great war between my country and the country of the Mongolians, in which many hundreds of thousands of lives will be lost. The second way, Dangung, is that between us we four shall think of some means of destroying this great work of the Mongolians so that they shall lose heart and return to their own land, and against the second way there is this. How can four defeat thousands? Now, Dangung, let us take the first way first. Is it possible to escape from this world of darkness?"

The lama nodded his head.

"Yes, Kachi," he replied; "escape is possible, though not by the great hole the Mongolians have

made with their devil machine. That hole is guarded, and none may leave that way except by the will of our enemies."

"Then how may we escape, Dangung?" asked Dick excitedly, speaking for the first time.

"That is what I am about to tell you, Nattoo," replied the lama. "Listen now, my friends. This mighty underworld place is not unknown to me and my people. Before the Mongolians came and made a great hole into the rock and found this place by accident, the lamas of Tibet knew of the cave, and to them it was a sacred place to which those in search of special merit would come and meditate, in the darkness and silence of the underearth, on life and death and life again." Suddenly the speaker's voice took on a note of scorn. "These fools, these Mongolians, think they know everything, but there are secrets in this sacred place of which they know nothing, and one of those secrets is how men may pass to and fro between the light and noise above and the darkness and the silence below."

The lama paused, and Colin took the opportunity to ask a question.

"But, Father," he asked, "if there is a secret way out of the cave, and you know how to find it, why did you not escape long ago? To remain here a prisoner, when you might be free, is a thing I cannot understand."

"That is because you are not of my faith, my son," replied the lama. "It was ordered by higher powers that I should be captured by the Mongolians and brought here, and would the All-Wise send me here merely that I might escape again? To think such a thought would be to credit the All-Wise with less than earthly wisdom, and so I knew that I had

been sent here for some purpose and that I must abide here till that purpose was fulfilled. And now that I think upon it, Kachi, it would seem that I was sent here to meet you and your companions, for surely it is more than a trick of fate that you should travel all the miles you have travelled to lie down and sleep by my fire?"

"I understand," replied Colin.

Put like that, there certainly did seem some force in the lama's argument, otherwise it was an extraordinary thing that they should lie down by the fire of the one man who could help them. So the road of escape lay open, and the first of the ways by which they might defeat the Mongolians had become possible. He mentioned the fact to the lama and the man nodded his head.

"That is true, Kachi," he replied. "The first way lies open; yet a way which may cost hundreds of thousands of lives is surely not a good way, and the second plan contains greater merit."

"I agree, Dangung," answered the boy; "but how is it possible? We are four against thousands, and be sure those thousands keep ceaseless watch——"

The speaker stopped in the middle of his sentence, for suddenly the monk had signed to him to be silent, and a moment later the sound of voices and approaching footsteps reached the companions' ears. Who were coming? Colin and Dick were about to look round when a whisper from the lama checked them.

"Do not move, my friends," breathed the monk. "Be as men exhausted by toil, for he who comes is the keeper of the labourers, a devil among devils, and it is not well to attract his attention. Caution now, or all your plans may be ruined."

The lama bowed his head over his beads, while

Dick and Larg, who were lying on the ground, relaxed and lay as men asleep. But Colin, who was already sitting up, merely rested his head upon his knees, and was thus able to watch the approach of the newcomers. There were three men, two of whom were reduced to insignificance by the side of their companion, a Mongolian of colossal proportions whose huge round face was a mask of cruelty and determination. One of the former was speaking, and even in the distance his voice struck a cord of memory in Colin's mind; now, as his words became audible, the boy suffered a shock which almost made him betray himself. The man was the pilot who had tried to steal their machine outside Merv; then, as a tiny flame flickered up in the fire, Colin suffered an even greater shock, for the light from the flame shone upon the large white hands of the big Mongolian, and on one finger there gleamed an ancient golden ring. Only for an instant did the light last; the next the flame had died down, but Colin had seen enough. That ring, that big white hand, where had he seen them last? The answer came pat upon the question. Outside Brockenhurst, holding a sub-machine gun through the window of a motor car, eight weeks before.

CHAPTER XVI

The Way of Escape

"I tell you it was the cursed Englishman, John Hanson, and his companions." Colin's bowed head shook involuntarily. Heavens! the pilot chap was actually talking about them. "Do you want me to repeat it? Do——"

"No, my friend," answered the big Mongolian, "I do not. You have already repeated it many times, and I have told you as often that I shot John Hanson and his companions two months ago in England with my own hands. I even attended their funeral, so——"

"Ah! but they were not buried. That funeral was a trick, I am sure. This Englishman is a fox. I made inquiries at Merv, and everything I heard agreed. John Hanson, his two nephews and his Indian servant were all travelling in that aeroplane, and where are they now? In Tibet. Here in this very cave perhaps, watching——"

"Cease!" The third man spoke for the first time, spitting out the word with a virulent intensity which silenced the pilot. "Why must you quarrel? I know nothing about this cursed Englishman, and I do not want to know. Come, Jang," turning to the great Mongolian. "You want to see——"

The voice of the speaker died into silence as the trio passed out of hearing, and as soon as they had disappeared in the gloom Colin raised his head and Dick sat up.

"Gosh! Colin," exclaimed the younger boy in a hushed whisper; "did you hear that? Luckily the big brute believes we're dead, but if the other chap starts nosing round we may find ourselves in queer street. He wouldn't recognize us, but he might spot Larg and—— Hullo! where has Larg gone? He was here a few seconds ago."

"The little man has gone after the three men," said the lama, understanding the boys' glances though not their words. "But what was Nattoo saying, Kachi? Were those men who have just passed speaking of you?"

Colin nodded his head, and briefly explained the position.

"There is danger, but I do not think it is great," replied the lama when the boy had finished speaking. "It was chance which brought those men to this place, but now that you are warned you can be on your guard. Besides, what is there to keep my young brothers here? If they decide on the first plan, we have only to wait till the little man returns, and then I will lead them out of the cave by a road their enemies will never follow."

He went on to speak of the Mongolians, of their first appearance in Tibet, of their cruelty, and in the conversation which followed the boys learned many things. They learned that once a month for a whole day the tunnelling machine stopped work, and that on the day in question all the Tibetan labourers were cleared out of the cave and sent to the surface, while their places were taken by squads of Mongolian soldiers who cleaned and disinfected the camp. They also learned that the labourers were not divided into gangs, but that when a fresh shift was needed the Mongolians merely drove into service the first men, they came

across. Evidently, as the boys had already surmised, labour was plentiful and life cheap. If a man fell dead from exhaustion there was always another to take his place, and though the cave was so big, it was not big enough to offer escape from the guards who periodically rounded up the shirkers. Besides, men must live, and hunger and thirst kept the wretched labourers within easy reach of the only people who could supply their wants. But what excited the boys most was the news that twelve white men were kept under special guard in a small cave opening off the large one, and that they were regularly employed on tasks requiring more skill than the ordinary labourers' work. Many questions they asked about these prisoners, and everything the lama was able to tell them convinced the boys that these white men were the sole survivors of the recent expeditions into Tibet and of the secret service men who had been sent to discover what was happening in the forbidden land. Twelve men! Could they take them with them? For a moment both boys considered the idea; then dismissed it with a shake of the head. Impossible. It was a beastly business turning your back on your own countrymen, but their first duty was to get their news to England, and— A slight noise came out of the gloom and disturbed their thoughts, and a second later Larg appeared and sat down silently by the fire.

"Where have you been, Larg?" asked Colin, glancing at the little man.

"I have been following those three men, Sahib," replied the Gurkha.

"Did you learn anything?" the boy went on.

"Yes, young Sahib, I learned much. I followed the men to a small cave which is closed by a strong door of steel, and from their words I learned that inside

the cave was dynamite. For some time the men were in the cave counting the boxes; then they came out, and while the man who held the key of the cave went one way, the big man and the little man you shot at Merv went another. Then, young Sahib, I remembered that dynamite is sometimes a good friend to men situated as we are, so after a while I went into the cave and carried away many boxes of dynamite and fuses which I hid in a secret place where we can find them again should we need them. After that, young Sahib, I locked the door, and that is all. Yet not quite all, now I think of it. See, I have found a big electric torch, and a new battery to go with it. Surely, Sahibs, it was fortunate I followed those three men?"

"Fortunate!" exclaimed Dick. "But, Larg, how—"

The younger boy saw Colin shake his head and stopped in the middle of his question. Colin was right. Better not know too much. Larg had secured possession of some dynamite, let them leave it at that, though, as their next business must surely be to get out of the cave, he couldn't see what use they were going to make of the stuff. He picked up the torch. It was a powerful, long-life affair, and for some seconds he examined it by the feeble light of the fire; then, as no one spoke, he broke the silence.

"I say, Colin," he said; "isn't it time we started? We know all we need to know, so let's ask Dangling to show us the way out of the cave. We must have been asleep a good many hours, and the longer we delay the more chance there is that we may be roped in for another spell of work, with all the additional risk of discovery. Besides, there's another danger. Suppose news of what happened at the Place of Question should reach Jang? That chap's no fool;

and the first thing he'll do will be to put two and two together, especially after what that little rat said, and if he should start rounding up the labourers for inspection things wouldn't look too good for us. What about it? Don't let's waste time trying to think out a second plan. To do so is attempting the impossible. There isn't a second plan for us, Colin, and our job is to get back to England with our news as fast as we can travel. Then there's another thing. We have two days' food left, and we ought to make use of that to get us as far away from this place as possible. Don't you agree?"

Colin nodded his head.

"I agree, Dick," he replied. "I've been thinking the same things. But I hate leaving those twelve poor blighters down here. Still, it can't be helped. We couldn't get them out without a fight, and even if we succeeded and got clear of the cave, the Mongolians would be scouring the country round for miles, and the odds are none of us would ever get back to England. Nevertheless, it's a beastly business, and I wish we hadn't got to make the choice."

The boy was silent for a few moments; then he turned to the lama and told him their decision.

"There is no second way, Danguing," he exclaimed; "for this thing which the Mongolians have made is beyond the power of four men to destroy. So show us how we may escape from the cave, Father, and we will journey back to our country with the knowledge we have gained."

The lama bowed his head.

"As my young brothers wish," he replied. "Nevertheless; to the All-Wise all things are possible, and a second way may yet be revealed to us. Now we must take hold of each other's garments, for we are going

into the darkness where it is easy for a man to lose himself."

As he spoke the lama rose to his feet, and with a last look round the boys and Larg followed suit, and a few seconds later the little party had turned their backs upon the lights of the underground camp, and were moving towards the rear of the cave. Soon the last fires and the last electric lights had been left behind and they were walking through utter darkness. Colin marvelled how the lama found his way, but the man moved forward without the slightest hesitation, and presently, after they had covered several hundreds of yards, the fugitives found their farther progress barred by solid rock, and, looking back, saw that they had advanced so far from the lights and fires that these formed a mere luminous glow in the distance.

Now the lama began to feel his way along the wall of rock, but very soon he stopped once more and after a brief pause a low scraping noise reached the listeners' ears. What was happening? Colin, who was immediately behind the lama, felt the man push on something, and a moment later the little party was moving forward again. This time, however, progress was limited to a few yards, after which the lama vacated his place at the head of the procession, and retraced his steps through the darkness. Next came a short period of silence, followed by the same scraping sound, and, then the noise of the lama's returning footsteps was heard as he made his way back to the front of the line.

"Where are we, Dambung, and what have you been doing?" asked Colin in a whisper. "A minute ago we could see the lights of the camp behind us but now they have disappeared."

"That is because we are standing in a narrow

passage in the rock behind a secret stone which swings to and fro," replied the lama. "Presently, when my friends climb the stairs, they will see the light again."

"The stair?" repeated Colin incredulously. To find a stair in this natural underground world was astonishing, to say the least of it.

"Yes, Kachi, a stair. Now let my friends listen carefully. The way out of this cave is up a flight of steps which ages and ages ago were carved out of the wall of the cave. The steps are broad but there is no rail, and a careless move may send the climber crashing to the cave below, especially, my friends, as we must climb in darkness. Therefore let my brothers always keep their right hands touching the wall as they go up, and so shall they come to the top in safety."

Dangung ceased speaking and started forward again, and at the end of a few minutes the fugitives came to the bottom of a flight of steps and began the upward climb. At first they saw nothing, but as they came out on to the wall of the cave they saw below them and far away on their left the lights of the camp spread out in a great circle of brightness. But no glimmer of that distant light reached the climbers. All around them was utter darkness. They could not even see each other, and after one glance at the abyss on their left they kept their heads turned resolutely away and their hands pressed hard against the wall upon their right.

Those terrible stairs! What race had carved them, Colin wondered as he climbed miserably upwards, and for what purpose had that vast cave been used in the long-forgotten past? The thought of the emptiness on their left, invisible but terribly there, made him sick, and he guessed that Dick was feeling likewise, while Larg, was none too happy, to judge by the

muttered invocations he was addressing to his various gods. Only Dangung appeared unconcerned, and even he halted and whispered a word of warning when presently the steps became wet and slippery beneath their feet.

"Something has happened since last I was here," he murmured anxiously. "Then the steps were dry, but now there is water upon them so that it is not easy to tread securely. Soon now we shall reach a place of safety, but until then let my brothers move with extra care."

Now the ascent became more nightmarish than ever, and before long the climbers were mounting upwards through the pitch darkness on all fours. Once Colin ventured another look to the left, but turned his head away quickly. The lights of the camp appeared to be immeasurably far below at the bottom of a vast well of blackness, and the single glance turned him giddy. Of what stupendous height was that immense cave? How much farther had they to climb? Colin began to count the steps. Twenty, thirty, forty, fifty, and then suddenly Dangung halted, and his voice came again out of the darkness.

"My brother may now use the thing which makes light," he said. "See, the camp of our enemies is no longer visible, and there are walls on our left and on our right so that we can climb with safety. Therefore let my brothers be cheerful, for the most difficult part of our path is behind us, and before long we shall come to a small cave where we may rest, and beyond that is the open air."

The lama ceased speaking, and turning their heads, the boys and Larg saw with immense relief that the lights of the camp were no longer visible. At last they were out of sight of the enemy, and it would be safe.

to use the torch Larg had found. Colin produced the long bright cylinder from a capacious pocket and switched on the light. At first the unaccustomed brilliance dazzled them, but as their eyes became used to the new conditions the companions saw that they were in a broad underground cleft which ended a hundred feet below in an immense yawning gulf. Colin pointed the torch above, but the roof of the cleft was lost in impenetrable darkness, so he lowered the light and began to examine their nearer surroundings. The cleft was about eighty yards wide, with a floor which sloped steeply upwards. It was like a vast chimney opening out of the roof of the cave, and close against the right-hand wall the flight of steps, up which they had climbed so far, continued above them until lost in the gloom.

"Gosh! what an awful place," exclaimed Dick in a hoarse voice. "Look at that hole below us. To think that we came up through that. And the steps aren't more than six feet wide. Heavens! it makes me sick to think about it."

Colin nodded his head absently. He had suddenly become conscious of a sound coming from the wall on their right. It was a low, continuous, muffled roar, and turning the torch on the wall from behind which the sound seemed to come, he saw that it was cracked and fissured in all directions and that in several places it was dripping water. Water! Then that roaring sound must be made by an underground river. He looked at Dambung, and seeing the question in the boy's eyes, the lama replied.

"It is a river, Kachi," he said. "At least that is what the wise ones say. Always that noise has been there, though now that I think of it the noise is louder than when I last came this way. Also, as you have

seen, Kachi, the steps are wet, so it would seem that some of the water from the river finds its way into the cave."

Again Colin nodded his head. 'He was standing staring at the fissured rock, and in his mind was a jig-saw puzzle of thoughts which were trying to form themselves into a picture. Water. An underground river, the noise of which sounded nearer than it had been. Fissured rock leaking with water from the river. Wet steps which had once been dry. All these thoughts were tumbling one over another in Colin's mind, and then suddenly they sorted themselves out and fell into their correct places and the picture was there. For a moment the boy gazed at the picture in his brain; then he faced his companions.

"I have it," he cried.

"Have what?" asked Dick curiously.

"The second plan!" replied Colin in a triumphant voice.

CHAPTER XVII

The Second Plan

"Surely the All-Wise has guided Kachi. Did I not say that a second plan would be made clear to us whereby the works of the Mongolians might be destroyed and thousands of innocent lives be spared, and here is the plan revealed to us out of the mind of our brother."

So spoke Dangung the lama. An hour had passed since Colin had made his startling announcement, and that hour had been spent by the four companions sitting in the darkness, for now it was of vital importance to economize light, while Colin had explained and enlarged his plan. It was a startling plan, but neither Dick nor Larg could find any objection to it except that it would mean many journeys up and down that terrible staircase, and now that Dangung had finally pronounced his blessing upon it the plan was at last accepted. There was still, however, much to be discussed. Turning to the lama, Colin asked him a question.

"You have told us, Father, that once a month the cave is cleared of the Tibetan labourers so that the Mongolian soldiers may come in and clean it. Can you tell us when the next holiday will be?"

"Not for certain, Kachi, for in this place of darkness it is impossible to tell day from night, but it is a long time since there has been a holiday, as you

call it, and I should think that the next one will be very soon, perhaps within twenty-four hours."

"Thanks, Father," replied the boy. "Twenty-four hours should be plenty of time," he went on, speaking to the others. He turned again to the monk. "Now we must think of my countrymen, Father. Yours will be safe out of the cave, but what of the twelve white men? Are they taken to the surface with the others?"

"No, Kachi. They are kept always in the cave, and I think that is done because the Mongolians fear that if they were taken to the light of day some of them might find a way to escape."

"So. Well, we shall have to rescue them somehow. As for the Mongolian soldiers, they'll have to look after themselves. They'll have the trains which brought them, and there will be plenty of time for them to escape if they're quick. Now, the first thing is to make a hand-rail with some of our rope to help us over the part where the stairs are wet and slippery, and when that's done we must carry all Larg's dynamite up here. That will be the worst job, and the sooner it's finished the better."

Now followed many hours during which the four companions worked continuously, except for brief intervals for rest and food. As soon as the hand-rail had been fixed by tying a length of the strong rope tightly between two projecting knobs of rock, the party descended into the cave again, and Larg led them to the place where he had hidden the cases of dynamite. There were half a dozen of these; besides boxes of detonators and fuse and, as each case of dynamite required two men to carry it up that terrible staircase, it meant that each of the four companions had to perform the hair-raising journey several times.

How the task was accomplished without mishap was a marvel. To show a light would have been to disclose their presence to the first suspicious eyes that looked their way, and so, in utter darkness, they climbed the invisible stairs with a sheer drop to destruction on one side, and the ever-present fear that an unlucky slip might cause their dangerous burden to explode and destroy them even more completely by blowing them into atoms.

Hour after hour they laboured. To hurry was impossible, and, gripping the handles of the boxes with their left hands, the bearers crept up the rock-hewn stairs step by step, while with their right hands they clutched at the unseen wall which was their sole guide in the darkness. Up, up they went, shuffling forward at a snail's pace lest greater speed should bring about the very disaster they were so desperately striving to avoid. Every fifty steps or so they had to rest, and, when the place where the steps were slippery with water was reached, progress was reduced to crawling upwards on hands and knees, while their terrible yet precious burdens were levered forward inch by inch until it was safe to stand upright again.

But at last the dynamite, the detonators and fuses had all been carried to a safe, dry place in the great cleft, and the four weary workers sank down on the hard rock for food and rest. Rest. Dick felt that he could lie there for days, but at the end of two hours Colin roused him and Larg, and the three of them set to work to mine the wall of rock on the other side of which the subterranean river roared on its way through the underworld. Fortunately they were now well inside the cleft and hidden from the cave, so that they were able to work by the light of the torch, for otherwise the task would have been impossible. For-

unfortunately, also, Colin had recently read and remembered a handbook on explosives, with the result that at the end of several more hours of unremitting labour they had plugged every suitable crevice in thirty yards of wall with dynamite cartridges carefully tamped, fixed dozens of detonating caps and laid scores of yards of fuse, raised out of the damp on pieces of rock, to a position several yards higher up the cleft.

"That ought to do the trick," croaked Colin in a voice hoarse with fatigue, when at length the final cartridge had been tamped, the last cap fixed, and the last yards of fuse carefully laid. "Gosh!" as the sullen roar on the other side of the mined wall seemed to wax in strength. "I do believe the underground river is in spate. Well, all the better if it is. Make more of a splash."

The boy laughed grimly, and led the way up the cleft to a flat shelf of rock on which Dangung had been sleeping. The lama was awake, however, and as the boys and Larg approached he sat up.

"Have you finished, Kachi?" he asked.

"Finished, Father," replied Colin wearily. "Now it's your turn. Will you go down to the cave and let us know as soon as the Mongolians begin to clear out the Tibetans?"

"I will, Kachi," replied the lama. "I have already eaten some food. Now do you and Nattoo and Larg eat well and then sleep. And have no fear, my son. When the time comes I will not fail to let you know."

He glided away, stepping carefully to avoid the lines of fuse, and presently, when they had eaten and drunk of some water which had collected in a hollow in the rock, the boys and Larg wrapped themselves in their cloaks, and went to sleep. Hour after hour they slept the sleep of utter exhaustion. In the world overhead

day waned and gave place to night and still they slept on. Midnight came, though in the underworld there was no means of telling whether it was midday or midnight, storm or sunshine in the world above, and the exhausted sleepers had not moved. A new day dawned, and high above them the sun had already risen some hours on the outer earth before the heavy silence of the great cleft was at last broken by the sound of slow shuffling footsteps, and, had there been any light, a tall dark figure might have been seen slowly mounting the stairs towards the three sleepers. Beside the sleepers the figure stopped, and shook them one by one; then as they sat up with startled cries he spoke to them soothingly.

"Hush, my friends," he said; "do not be startled. It is I; Danggung. Many hours have you slept, but now the time has come to work again. I bring you news. As I started to climb the stairs the Mongolians were beginning to remove the Tibetans from the cave, and soon there will be none left below save ourselves and our enemies and the twelve white men."

The news acted like a douche of cold water, and brought the boys and Larg to their feet in a moment. A few questions, followed by some snatched mouthfuls of food, and then the four companions were once more on their way down the rock-hewn steps, making as they hoped their last descent of that terrible stairway. Colin and Dick were feeling wonderfully refreshed after their long sleep, and Larg, that man of steel, might never have known the meaning of fatigue, and as they felt their way downward through the darkness they were all buoyed up with the premonition of success. And why not? No one knew that they were in the cave. No one knew that they were on their way to rescue the twelve white prisoners. Their attack,

when it came, would be a complete surprise, and as there would certainly not be more than two armed guards set over the captives, these would be quickly disposed of, and before the enemy could take alarm they would be up the stairs again, and their rescued countrymen in safety high up the cleft. Then would come the final drama. Colin smiled grimly. He still had half a box of matches hidden in a safe place among his clothes, and in an hour or two one of those matches was going to close for ever the greatest enterprise ever undertaken by man, and at the same time rid the world of the threat of a terrible devastating war. It was a good thought. As Dangung had said, the second plan was immeasurably better than the first.

Thirty minutes later the rescue party had reached the cave, and were following Dangung through the darkness. In the distance they could see the lights of the camp and the moving figures of the Mongolian soldiers, but where they were the vast place was empty and silent, and they proceeded unmolested on their way until presently Dangung halted and pointed ahead to where an oil lamp, attached to the wall of the cave, shed a faint glow around.

"That is where the white men are imprisoned, my brothers," he whispered. "Below the lantern there is a door, and behind the door is a cave where your countrymen are kept when they are not labouring for their captors. See, there is but one man on guard over them, and he leans against the wall on the other side of the door."

The boys saw well enough. One man alone stood between them and the completion of their enterprise, but how to approach him and silence him before he could give the alarm was a formidable question. They

dared not risk a shot. A shot, even a pistol-shot, would awake a hundred echoes and bring every Mongolian in the cave down upon them. The man must be got out of the way silently, that was certain, but again, how was it to be done? Colin looked at Larg, or more truly at the place in the darkness where Larg should be, and the Gurkha, perhaps feeling the boy's glance upon him, whispered out of the gloom.

"Sahib, this is my task. I will move as a shadow and our enemy will neither see nor hear. But there is this you can do to help. Count five minutes slowly, and then make a slight noise just loud enough to reach the sentry and make him look this way. Does the Sahib understand?"

Colin nodded his head, forgetting that the action was invisible in the darkness.

"I understand, Larg," he whispered in reply. "I'm to count three hundred and then make a noise. Good luck."

"Good luck, Sahib."

The words were a mere breath of sound, and the next moment Colin had begun to count. One, two, three, four, five. . . . For the first time in his life Colin realized how long it takes to count three hundred slowly. More than once he almost convinced himself that he was being too slow, and that the five minutes must have already elapsed. He could hear slight impatient movements in the darkness by his side, and guessed that Dick was experiencing the same sensations, but he resolutely checked an almost overmastering desire to hurry. He must not be hasty! Better to count too slowly rather than too quickly. Larg must be given his full time or everything might yet be ruined, and the boy knew how immeasurably long even a few minutes could appear to people in their

position. Two hundred. Two hundred and one, two, three. . . . Heavens, what a time! Colin strove to see into the darkness beyond the sentry, to pick up some movement which might tell him that Larg was in position, but he could see nothing, while the Mongolian continued to lounge carelessly against the wall of the cave, completely oblivious of his approaching doom. Was Larg really there, hiding in the blackness? Colin wondered. Suppose he failed? Suppose something went wrong? Suppose. . . . Dash it all! he mustn't think. He must count. Two hundred and ninety, ninety-one, two. Thank goodness! he had almost finished. Ninety-seven, ninety-eight, ninety-nine, three hundred.

Colin breathed a sigh of relief and dropped a small piece of rock he had been holding ready in his hand. The noise of its fall sounded startlingly loud in the stillness, and instantly the sentry ceased to lounge and sprang upright, his head craned forward as he peered in their direction. The man was on the alert, there was no doubt about that. For an instant the boy found time to admire his quick reaction to the faint noise; then, from the gloom on the other side of the door, a shadow moved swiftly forward, something flashed in the dull light, followed by a low thud, and the next moment the sentry collapsed into the shadow's arms and was laid silently upon the floor.

"Come on!"

Colin dashed forward, with Dick and D'Angung close behind. Larg was already at work on the door, which was bolted but not locked, and a second later the bolts had been drawn and the door flung open.

"Collect the sentry's arms and ammunition, Larg," ordered Colin.

"Yes, Sahib."

The little man turned back, while the boys entered the prison. It was lighted by a single oil lamp similar to that which hung over the door, and by its pale glimmer they made out a dozen men sitting or lying on the floor in various attitudes of dejection and fatigue. Poor devils, thought Colin, it was difficult to tell that they were white men, they were so grimed and ragged; then, as he opened his mouth to speak, a voice accosted them from the back of the small cave.

"What's up now? I thought this was a holiday. Can't you let us have one day's rest in thirty, you swine?"

Colin chuckled.

"This is a holiday," he answered in English; "the best holiday you've ever spent. We've come to rescue——"

"Rescue!"

The word was repeated by a dozen voices, for by this time the men who had been sleeping were wide awake.

"Shut up! Don't make so much noise," warned Colin quickly. "D'you want to bring the Mongolians down upon us? Listen to me. Ever heard of John Hanson? But, of course, you have. Well, we're his nephews, and that's sufficient introduction for the time being. Now, see this man," pointing to Dangung. "He's a friendly lama and he knows a secret way out of the cave. But there are no lights, so each man of you must take a grip of this length of rope Dangung is holding, and follow him wherever he goes. And for Heaven's sake, when you come to the stairs, keep close up against the right-hand wall or you'll be for it. Now jump to it. The sooner we're off the better."

The prisoners required no further bidding, and in a few seconds the line was formed, and they were ready

to start. But now came a sudden interruption. The sound of approaching footsteps reached those within the cave, and the next instant Larg had slipped in through the door with the news that some men were approaching. Here was misfortune. The newcomers, even if they were only passers-by, could hardly fail to notice the open door, and then would follow the discovery of the sentry's body and the alarm. Colin gripped his pistol and stepped to the doorway, followed by Dick and Larg. The footsteps were already ominously close, and as the rescuers peered through the opening they saw the figures of two men silhouetted against the glow of the distant camp. One man appeared to be very big and tall, the other—— Colin smothered an exclamation of dismay. Heavens! they were the Mongolian, Jang, and the air-pilot he had shot at Merv, at least—— The men had halted and were staring at the cave. Evidently they had seen something which aroused their suspicions; a moment later the bigger man spoke to his companion, with the result that suddenly a white beam shot across the intervening space and bathed the open door and the dead sentry in a blaze of light.

Crack! A bullet chipped the rock close to where Colin was standing, while on his part the boy struggled desperately to get at his torch. They must have light! Dick's pistol went off with a crash, awaking a dozen echoes, followed by Larg's; then Colin had got his torch free and had the beam shining full on their enemies. They were Jang and the pilot! The big Mongolian's face was convulsed with rage, and Colin saw that the man was aiming straight at him. Without thinking what he did, the boy ducked so that the bullet passed harmlessly over his head; the next moment he had flung forward his own pistol and fired,

and with a feeling of intense surprise Colin saw the huge Mongolian crumple up and collapse upon the ground. One down! Colin looked to see what had happened to the pilot, but the man was already in full flight towards the camp, shrieking for help as he ran, and, seeing that it was hopeless to pursue, the boy called to the prisoners inside the small cave.

"Come along! Quick! We must get away at once. And for Heaven's sake don't let go of the rope. Anyone who does stands a good chance of getting lost, and there will be no coming back to search for him this journey."

He hustled the rescued men out of the cave, and, with Dangun at the head of the line, they set off at a trot with the boys and Larg bringing up the rear. Already the soldiers in other parts of the cave had taken alarm, and, looking back towards the camp, Colin could see several men running towards the cave where the prisoners had been. But what caused the boy most alarm was the number of extra lights and torches which had suddenly appeared, and the fact that some of the soldiers had already formed themselves into lines and were beginning an organized search of the cave. One party, indeed, was actually moving in their direction, and, at sight of their squat figures silhouetted against the glare of the distant camp, Colin passed an urgent message along the line telling Dangun to go quicker.

But to hurry through the pitch darkness with a line of broken weary men behind was easier said than done. Again and again the boys looked back. If they could get on the other side of the turning stone without being detected they would be safe, but, should one of those searching torches get near enough to pick up their straggling column in the darkness, they would have every soldier in the cave down upon them in no

time. Colin stared anxiously in front. How much farther to the stone? he wondered. If only he could see something, but the next moment he called himself a fool, realizing that the dense darkness surrounding them was their surest safeguard. On, on! Every now and then one of the rescued men stumbled, and the line had to halt while he was helped to his feet; then off they started again at a slow shambling trot, which made Colin want to yell to them to hurry till he felt as though he would burst, so great was the control he had to put upon himself.

By this time one party of searchers was perilously near. It consisted of six men and an officer who, with as many torches, were searching the darkness around them. Colin watched them with anxiety. Fortunately they were making enough noise themselves to drown the patter of the fugitives' footsteps, but if they got a little nearer discovery would be certain. Again the boy tried to probe the darkness ahead. Suppose Dangung had lost his way? How anyone could maintain any sense of direction in that darkness, he could not imagine. Hullo! what on earth was happening now? The party had come to a sudden stop. No, they hadn't, they were going on again, but now they were going in a different direction. Heavens! had Dangung really gone wrong? Colin whispered a question to Dick in front of him but the younger boy shook his head; the next moment the line stopped again and a whispered message came back from the front saying that they had arrived.

Colin breathed a sigh of relief, and hurried forward to the head of the line. The rescued men were already filing through the secret opening, but now, all of a sudden, a flickering beam of light from one of the nearest searchers came wandering their way, and an instant

later a cry of astonishment told the fugitives that they were discovered.

No leisurely escape now, while the Mongolians searched the great cave for the missing men. Colin shouted to Danguing to lead the rescued prisoners up the stairs, and dashed back to the rear. The nearest Mongolians were already running towards them, but as the boys and Larg opened fire with their pistols, and three men fell almost at once, the survivors hurriedly retreated. Colin listened. The last of the fugitives was already shuffling down the passage. He whispered to Dick and Larg, and together they pushed upon the moving stone. Dash it all! how did the thing work? For a few brief moments they were in darkness and their actions were hidden from their pursuers, but at any instant their enemies might receive reinforcements and the attack be resumed. Thank goodness! it was moving. Slowly the great stone swung to; then, as it slid into place, there came the sound of running feet from the other side of the barrier, followed by shouts of astonishment. The enemy had arrived in force and found them flown. How long would it be before they discovered the secret of the stone? Colin touched Dick and Larg, and together they turned and crept silently along the dark passage towards the foot of the stairs. They had won the first round; another hour, only one more hour, and the victory would be theirs.

CHAPTER XVIII

The Fight on the Stair

The ascent of the stairway had already begun, but very soon Colin discovered that it would require far longer than the allotted hour to get the rescued men to the top. A few of them appeared to be in fair condition, but the majority were so broken and worn-out by their long imprisonment that the flight across the cave had already fatigued them, and they could only proceed at a slow shuffle, with frequent halts for rest.

Colin and Dick found it hard to restrain their impatience. Every time the line came to a halt they looked below and saw beneath them dozens of shifting lights as their enemies searched for the way by which the fugitives had escaped. Would they discover the moving stone? A number of men were gathered about a section of the wall where the stone should be, and, by the flashing of the torches and the excited voices which rose up to them, the boys guessed that the Mongolians suspected some secret exit from the cave and were striving desperately to find it. And suppose they did? A shuffling sound came from above them, and the slow ascent was resumed. So another thirty steps were mounted, and then again the line halted. Colin leaned against the rock wall and looked below. The soldiers were still clustered round the place where the stone was situated, and taking his field-glasses from their secret pocket he focused them upon the crowd of men. What he saw increased his anxiety. The soldiers

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were pushing and pulling on the rock with their hands, and as he watched, the group parted and a huge man with a bandage around his head strode into their midst. Jang! Colin almost dropped his glasses. So he hadn't killed the big Mongolian after all! The bullet must have grazed his skull and stunned him. But now there was more urgent need for haste. Jang, Colin was sure, would soon discover the secret of the stone, and, with a whispered word to Dick, he began to climb the stairs past the resting men, telling them of their danger and urging them to greater haste.

So the ascent began again. The rescued men did their best, but even so their progress was alarmingly slow. Every few minutes Colin halted and examined the happenings below through his glasses, and the fourth time he did this he saw a sudden excited movement among the crowd of soldiers. The next moment they seemed to melt into the rock as water disappears down a funnel. The boy snapped his glasses shut and hurried after his companions. The secret of the stone had been discovered and the hunt was up.

"I want the two fittest men among you who can shoot."

"I'm with you, son."

"And me."

Two voices came out of the darkness and two men detached themselves from the line.

"Take care. Don't go too near the edge," whispered Colin. "Now then, you others, get a move on, and for Heaven's sake hurry! The Mongolians have found the stairs, and they are already after us."

As he spoke, the line began to move again, while the boy and the two volunteers stood waiting for the fugitives to pass. Colin had made his plans quickly when he saw that their way of retreat had been dis-

covered. Despite his protests, Dick had been sent to the head of the line to help Dàngung. With him he carried the torch to light the rescued men past the carefully laid fuses, and of those who remained behind, the two volunteers were armed with pistols, while Colin took possession of the sentry's rifle which Larg had been carrying across his shoulders.

So the rear-guard was formed and the slow retreat resumed, but soon Colin saw that they would be overtaken long before they reached the cleft. Far below them, twinkling lights appeared on the stairs, moving rapidly upwards, and every time the boy looked back the lights were nearer and more numerous, until he was able to see dozens of shadowy figures mounting upwards in hot pursuit.

"We'll have to stop and shoot a few," Colin whispered to his companions at last. "If we can do that, the others will put out their torches, and in the darkness they won't be able to climb so fast. But be careful we don't shoot each other. The two in front had better kneel and those behind stand up. And watch out for the stairs presently. They get wet and slippery, but there's a rope you can cling on to which will help you over the bad part."

While Colin was speaking he and his companions had been following the slow-moving line ahead; now, as there came to them the sound of booted feet hurrying up the steps behind, they halted and turned about, forming into two lines as Colin had suggested. The nearest pursuers were less than fifty steps below, and behind them scores of flashing lights were streaming up the side of the great cave. Evidently the Mongolians had gathered in force to effect their recapture. Colin measured the distance with his eyes.

"Wait till they're a bit nearer," he whispered,

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"then empty your magazines into them. You three with the pistols deal with those just in front, and I'll let those farther down the line have it with the rifle. Ready? Fire!"

Then for a few seconds followed such an uproar as that vast cave had never heard before. The reports of the firearms awoke every echo in the great place, and to these were soon added screams of pain and terror as the hail of bullets struck the closely climbing men. The lights at the head of the column went out at once as their bearers fell dead upon the stairs or crashed headlong into the black depths below; then, as Colin's rifle began to sow death among the climbers lower down the stairway, the whole long, luminous line seemed to waver, and the next moment every torch had gone out and utter darkness had fallen upon the scene.

"That's checked them," whispered Colin. "Come along now. Hurry, before they recover."

Again the flight was resumed. The sounds of battle had lent strength to the fugitives ahead, for they had gained an appreciable distance upon their rear-guard, and all at once, to his joy, Colin's hand came in contact with wet rock. Thank Heaven! they were nearing the top at last. Once past the wet steps and they would soon be inside the cleft and ready to fire the mine. Now the rear-guard were hauling themselves up by the guiding rope hand-over-hand. From above came the sound of shuffling feet. They were overtaking the advance party. Colin paused to listen, but he could hear no signs of pursuit. Had the enemy retreated? Surely not? Ah! so that was the game. A sudden harsh rat-tat-tat had broken the silence, and away on the left of the fugitives a stream of bullets screamed through the darkness. Colin grinned. The

enemy had brought up a machine-gun, but they did not know that the wall of the cave curved inwards, and so they were firing in the wrong direction. The boy resumed his climb. They were half-way up the wet stretch. High overhead a faint light glimmered and disappeared. Dick was leading the head of the line past the fuses. From below a rifle rang out, and the harsh splutter of the machine-gun began again, nearer this time. Someone had seen the light above. Up, up climbed the rear-guard. How much farther? Colin wondered. What was that? He had felt a sudden pull upon the rope to which he was clinging, and the pull had come from behind. The enemy had found the rope! The boy halted, swung round, and fired a bullet into the darkness. A scream showed that the bullet had found a mark, but the next moment a dozen rifles went off below and a hail of bullets splashed the surrounding rock. Colin gasped and hurried on. That had been a near thing! Above, he could hear Dick's voice telling the fugitives to keep to the left. What was this? The end of the rope? Thank Heaven, they were up! The boy drew his knife and cut through the cord, and as it parted there came an outburst of terrified screams from below as the enemy, who had been clinging to it, suddenly found their support give way and fell backwards on to their companions behind them.

The last lap. Colin rushed upwards, regardless of danger. He bumped into Larg. From above came Dick's voice, calling to them, and a glimmer of light. Now they were skirting the lines of fuses, and a few seconds later they were standing by the younger boy's side.

"Are they all up?" gasped Colin.

"Yes."

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"What about the two chaps who were with us?"

"I've sent them on."

"Good. Now, for it, then. Here, Dick, take this rifle, and fire down the steps, but lie low."

He suited his own actions to his words and flung himself on the ground, and while Dick and Larg opened fire into the darkness, he drew forth the precious box of matches and struck a light. For a moment he shielded the tiny flame in his hands; the next he had applied it to the ends of the fuses bunched closely together, and as they spluttered into life he and his two companions sprang to their feet, and rushed up the cleft, regardless of the bullets which followed their retreat.

Now other sounds were added to the crash of fire-arms. The enemy had seen the spluttering fuses and guessed their meaning, and screams of terror and the thud of pounding feet told the fugitives that those in front were in full retreat. Colin looked back. The multitude of torches had been switched on again, and while the men in the rear, ignorant of the peril ahead, continued to advance, those above were fighting their way downwards. Curses and angry shouts broke the stillness, and every now and then an agonized scream was added to the uproar as some unfortunate wretch lost his footing or was pushed off the stair into space. Colin turned and raced on. He was feeling sick, sick with horror and dread. A terrible thing was about to happen, and those men——. But they had brought it on themselves. They had been cruel and tyrannical. They had planned war and destruction and death, and now—— Colin stumbled forward and fell to the ground beside Dick and Larg. For an instant a dazzling flash had banished the darkness, lighting up the immense cleft and the struggling party

of rescued men far above. The next moment darkness had fallen again like a cloak, and, while the ground shook and heaved beneath the shivering companions, an appalling roar drowned all other sounds. Crash after crash, it echoed through the underground world until the vast place was an ocean of thundering waves of bellowing clamour, and then to the uproar of falling rock was added another noise, a terrible, rushing, stunning noise as though thousands of immense antediluvian animals were tearing through the darkness in mad stampede, while from the blackness above there beat down upon the three companions a drenching torrent of spray. So for several seconds the appalling cacophony continued; then it gradually subsided to a continuous crashing roar, and struggling to his feet Dick switched on the torch and directed the beam below. A terrifying sight met the companions' gaze. Forty yards from where they stood the wall of the cleft had ceased to be, and in its place was a vast gaping hole which vomited forth a huge body of black, oily-looking water. Bellowing, it burst forth from the hole and, rushing across the cleft, beat against the opposite wall in a great churning wave which writhed and curled this way and that until, its force expended, gravity took charge and sent the swollen waters of the underground river crashing down into the cave below. It was a gigantic, appalling spectacle, and for some seconds the three companions stood watching before they turned and made their way slowly up the cleft, where presently they overtook Dantung with the men they had rescued from a living death. Many asked them questions, but they shook their heads and made no reply, and so the party proceeded slowly on its way until at last they came to a small cave through the opening of which streamed the light of day. The

light of day! Suddenly Colin was conscious of an immense thankfulness, and turning to the little company he spoke the words they were expecting from him.

"Gentlemen," he said, "the tunnel is destroyed, for in a few hours the underground river will have flooded the workings beyond repair. Now let us sleep, for it is a thing we all need, and when we have slept we will discuss our plans."

So saying, he wrapped his cloak around him and lay down on the hard ground, and in a few minutes rescuers and rescued were fast asleep, all save Danguing the lama, who sat, and thought, and told his beads, and listened to the distant roar of the underground river which had closed the sacred cave for ever. Presently, however, his thinking came to an end and he also lay down on the floor. The sacred cave was closed, but surely it had been by the will of the All-Wise and was a meritorious deed, for much evil had been averted. Yes, surely that was so. Danguing slept.

CHAPTER XIX

The End of the Shadow

Two days later Colin, Dick and Larg lay in hiding near the outer rim of the Mongolian camp. Much had happened during those two days. The twelve men rescued from the cave, among whom were Stamford Jones, four secret service men and seven members of the Ross-Wilkinson Everest expedition, were obviously in no fit state to undertake a long and dangerous journey across Tibet, so at Dangung's suggestion they had been conducted to a monastery hidden in the mountains close to the mouth of the cave. The monastery had escaped the attentions of the Mongolians, and, having obtained a promise from the lamas to look after the rescued men till such time as they could be conducted back to their own land, the boys and Larg had said good-bye to their new friends and set out on the final stages of their strange journey.

These had first taken them to a point where they could see the mouth of the tunnel, and long before the actual opening came in sight they knew that their efforts had been successful, and saw signs of break-up and disorganization among the enemy's ranks. Trains loaded with men and materials were puffing away into the interior, flights of aeroplanes were departing in the same direction, but even these signs of flight did not prepare the companions for the amazing sight which met their eyes when at length the mouth of the tunnel came into view.

Before them lay an immense lake out of which the roofs of power-houses, store-houses and barracks rose like grey islands, while from the mouth of the tunnel itself poured a spouting torrent continuously adding to the vast volume of water, and carrying the confines of the lake farther and farther afield. Evidently, as Colin had half suspected, the underground river was far above the level of the tunnel, and the huge cave, which a short time ago had been the scene of such activity, was now a great subterranean reservoir which seemed likely to go on pouring its surplus water into the newly made lake until the world's end. For an hour the three companions had sat watching the strange and exciting scene; then they had gone on their way, with the result that by the middle of the afternoon they reached a place on the border of one of the outermost of the Mongolian aerodromes, and lay watching while the busy mechanics prepared several machines for flight.

One machine in particular attracted the boys' attention. She was a powerful four-seater monoplane with speed written in every one of her lines, and evidently she was being made ready for flight that very afternoon. If only they could seize her and make good their escape, they might be in India before dark. Could they do it? Eagerly the boys discussed the pros and cons, while a short distance away the squat Mongolian mechanics put the final touches to the monoplane. It would have to be a matter of perfect timing. If the Mongolians would only leave her for five minutes it would be enough. Colin conveyed their plan to Larg, and the little man nodded his head.

"It is a good plan, young Sahib," the Gurkha replied. "And do not fear. We were not born to die this journey, otherwise we had never been brought

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safely out of the dark place. What a story to tell my people. It is like a story of old when men fought giants, and Larg will be a great man, even as great as the young Sahibs who did such wonders."

The boys laughed, and continued their eager watching. Even in that aerodrome, some miles from the newly-formed lake, there was evidence of disorganization. Here and there Tibetan men and women wandered about the ground, peering at the strange things which flew, and no one ordered them away, and if only the mechanics would leave the machine for a few minutes the boys knew that they could reach her without the alarm being given. The danger lay in being pursued. There might be faster machines at hand, single-seater fighters. Still, they must take some risks. Slowly the minutes passed. Some of the mechanics finished their work and wandered away. Now there were only two left, and they seemed about to leave. Colin signed to Dick and Larg, and the three companions wandered on to the flying ground. With their filthy ragged appearance they looked like any other Tibetan, and no one noticed them. A few days ago, they guessed, their appearance would have meant capture and the labour gangs, but a few days ago no Tibetan would have dared enter the aerodrome. Now it seemed as though they knew that their late masters were leaving, that they need no longer fear them or their oppression, and as the boys sensed this immunity their confidence rose.

Soon they were only a dozen yards from the monoplane and the last two mechanics were leaving. The men had glanced once in their direction and had paid them no further attention. Why should they? Would anyone suspect three filthy Tibetans of the intention to steal an aeroplane and fly away in her? The men

gathered up their tools and wandered after their companions, and, with fast beating hearts, the boys watched them go. But, they must not hurry. Hurry might yet ruin everything. The mechanics were a hundred yards away; now they were entering a hangar, and at a sign from Colin the three companions ran forward and climbed into the monoplane.

Two minutes later they were in the air. There had been some shouting and a few shots were fired after them, but no 'plane got up in pursuit, and three hours after the start Colin brought the machine to earth in an aerodrome on Indian soil. There the arrival of a Mongolian war-plane caused a mild sensation. The anti-aircraft guns were hurriedly manned, half a dozen fighters run out, but the sensation caused by her appearance overhead was nothing compared to the sensation which occurred when, having landed, she disgorged three ragged, filthy-looking scarecrows who demanded to see the commanding officer. At first those on the spot were inclined to dispute the demand, but a few words from Colin changed their view, and the boys and Larg were conducted to an office where a grey-haired, distinguished-looking man greeted them with polite surprise.

"You speak English," he said to Colin, who was acting as spokesman, "but who on earth are you, and why do you arrive in a Mongolian monoplane?"

"We are John Hanson's nephews, sir," answered the boy; "and this Gurkha is my uncle's servant, Larg, and we have just come from Tibet."

"John Hanson's nephews! Tibet!" The officer was on his feet. "What do you mean, boy? Where's your uncle? Every post along the frontier has received orders to look out for you and him. What——"

The speaker paused, realizing that there were others

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in the room beside himself and the new arrivals, but his eyes strayed to the window of the office through which a view of the distant mountains was visible. Colin interpreted the glance, and replied.

"Uncle's all right, sir," he said; "at least, we hope he is, and we have to report that the storm clouds have cleared from over Tibet."

The O.C. turned back to face the boys and smiled.

"That is good news indeed. You must tell me about it presently. Now you will want baths and fresh clothes, and afterwards I hope you will dine with me in my bungalow."

Five months later Colin, Dick, Larg, and the boys' uncle were back in England. The latter was well and in his right mind again, and, with the twelve rescued prisoners, had been brought safely out of Tibet by a couple of aeroplanes some weeks after the boys' spectacular arrival in India. The pilots of these same planes had reported the complete evacuation of the country by the Mongolians, and the existence of an immense lake where once their great camp had stood, and now John Hanson and his nephews were celebrating their safe return from so many perils by a dinner party. True, the only guest was Mr. Staunton Travers, but he proved to be a host in himself, and now, having insisted that Larg should be brought into the room, he rose to give a toast.

"To those who lifted the shadow of Tibet," he said, and drained his glass.

John Hanson bowed to his nephews and Larg.

"To those who lifted the shadow of Tibet," he repeated.

